

I AM NUMBER FOUR

THE LOST
FILES
THE SEARCH FOR SAM

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PITTACUS LORE

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CHAPTER 1

I don't know if I can.

I'm too weak to speak, so I don't say it out loud. I merely think it. But One can hear me. She can always hear me.

"You *have* to," she says. "You have to wake up. You have to fight."

I'm at the bottom of a ravine, my legs twisted beneath me, a boulder pushed uncomfortably between my shoulder blades. A stream laps against my thigh. I can't see anything because my eyes are closed, and I can't open my eyes because I don't have the strength.

But to be honest, I don't want to open my eyes. I want to give up, to let go.

Opening my eyes means facing the truth.

It means realizing that I have been washed onto a dry riverbank. That the wet I feel on my legs is no river. It's blood, from a compound fracture of my right leg, the bone now jutting out of my shin.

It means knowing that I've been left for dead by my own father, some seven thousand miles from home. That the closest thing I have to a brother, Ivanick, is the one who nearly killed me, pushing me brutally off the edge of the steep ravine.

It means facing the fact that I am a Mogadorian, a member of an alien race bent on the extermination of the Loric people and the eventual domination of Earth.

I clench my eyes shut, desperately trying to hide from the truth.

With my eyes still closed, I can drift off to a sweeter place: a California beach, my bare feet digging into the sand. One sits beside me, looking at me with a smile. This is One's memory of California, a place I've never been. But we've shared the memory for so long during that three-year twilight that it feels as much mine as hers.

"I could stay here all day," I say, the sun warm on my skin.

She looks at me with a soft smile, like she couldn't agree more. But when she opens her mouth to speak, her words don't match her expression: they're harsh, stern, commanding.

“You can’t stay,” she says. “You have to get up. Now.”

My eyes open. I’m in my bed in the volunteers’ sleeping quarters at the aid camp. One stands at the end of the bed.

As in my dream, she’s smiling, but now it isn’t a sweet smile. It’s a teasing smirk.

“God,” she says, rolling her eyes. “You sleep a lot.”

I laugh, sitting up in bed. I *do* sleep a lot lately. It’s been seven weeks since I pulled myself out of the ravine and other than some residual weakness in my right leg, I’ve made a full recovery. But my sleep schedule hasn’t adjusted: I’m still sleeping ten hours a night.

I look around the hut and see that all the other beds are empty. My fellow aid-workers have already risen for morning chores. I get to my feet, wobbling briefly on my right leg. One smirks again at my clumsiness.

Ignoring her, I slip into my sandals, throw on a shirt, and exit the hut.

Outside, the sun and humidity hit me like a wall. I’m still sticky from sleep and I’d kill for a shower, but Marco and the other workers are already elbow-deep in morning chores. I missed my chance.

The first hour of the day is devoted to housekeeping around camp: cooking breakfast, doing laundry, cleaning dishes. After that, a jeep will pick some of us up and take us deeper into the village. We’re currently working on a water project there, modernizing the town’s antiquated well. The others will stay behind in the classroom next to camp, teaching the village children. I’ve been trying to learn Swahili, but I’ve got a ways to go before I’ll be ready to teach.

I bust my ass at the camp. It gives me great pleasure to help the villagers. But mostly I work as hard as I do out of gratitude.

After dragging my busted body out of the ravine and a quarter mile through the jungle, I was eventually discovered by an elderly villager. She mistook me for an aid-worker, my cover while tracking down Hannu, Number Three. She went to the camp and returned an hour later with Marco and a visiting doctor. I was brought back to camp on a makeshift stretcher; the doctor reset my leg, stitched it up, and put me in a cast I’ve only recently shed.

Marco gave me a place here, first to recover and now to volunteer, without asking any questions. All he expects in return is that I do my chores and that I fulfill the same labor requirements as the other aid-workers.

I have no idea what story he's constructed in his head to account for my condition. I can only figure that Marco must have guessed correctly that Ivan was the one who did this to me, based on the fact that Ivan disappeared on the day of my accident without a word to anybody at camp. Perhaps Marco's generosity is motivated by pity. He may not know exactly what happened, but he knows I was forsaken by family. And since Marco is more or less right, I don't mind him pitying me.

Besides, the funny thing about being forsaken by my family, by my entire race?

I've never been happier.

Renovating the village's well is sweaty, tedious work, but I have an advantage the other workers don't. I have One. I talk to her throughout my work, and though my muscles get sore and my back aches, the hours fly.

Mostly, she motivates me by teasing me. "You're doing that wrong." "You call *that* trowelling?" "If I had a body, I'd be done with that by now." She mocks my efforts, reclining like a sunbathing lady of leisure at the edge of the work site.

You wanna try this? I bark back in my mind.

"Couldn't," she'll say. "Don't want to break a nail."

Of course I have to be careful not to actually *speak* to her while I work, not in front of the others. I'd developed a reputation as a bit of a weirdo, for talking to myself in my first few weeks here. Then I learned to silence my side of the conversation with One, to merely think *at* her, instead of actually speaking. Thankfully my reputation has recovered, and the others no longer look at me like I might be a total lunatic.

That night I have kitchen duty with Elswit, the camp's most recent addition. We cook *githeri*, a simple dish of corn and beans. Elswit shucks and scrapes the cobs of corn while I soak and rinse the beans.

I like Elswit. He asks a lot of questions about where I come from and what brought me here, questions I know better than to answer with the

truth. Fortunately he doesn't seem to mind that my replies are either vague or nonexistent. He's a big talker, always racing ahead to the next question without noticing my silence, always interjecting tidbits about his own life and upbringing instead. From what I've gathered, he's the son of a very wealthy American banker, a man who does not approve of Elswit's humanitarian pursuits.

Living up to my father's standards was difficult enough when I was a child, but after my experiences in One's mind, it became impossible. I had grown soft, had developed sympathies and concerns that I knew would be impossible for my father to understand, let alone tolerate. Elswit and I have a certain amount in common. We're both disappointments to our fathers.

But I quickly realized the similarities between us don't stretch that far. Despite Elswit's claims of "estrangement" from his family, he's still in touch with his wealthy parents, and still has unlimited access to their wealth. Apparently his father has even arranged for a private plane to pick him up in Nairobi in a few weeks just so Elswit can be back home for his birthday. Meanwhile my dad thinks I'm dead and I can only guess he's happy about it.

After dinner I have a well-earned shower and get into bed. One's curled up in a rattan chair in the corner. "Bed? *Already?*" she teases.

I give the room a once-over. No one's around, so it's safe to talk out loud, as long as I keep my voice down. Talking out loud feels more natural than communicating silently.

"I want to get up with the others from here on out."

One shoots me a look.

"What? My cast's off, my limp's almost gone . . . I'm recovered. It's time for me to pull equal weight around here."

One frowns and picks at her shirt. Of course I know what's bothering her. Her people are out there, earmarked for extinction by my race. And here she is, stuck in Kenya. Moreover, she's stuck inside my consciousness, disembodied, with no will or agency of her own. If she had her wish, I know she'd be somewhere else—*anywhere* else—taking up the fight.

"How long are we going to stay here?" she asks, somberly.

I play dumb, pretending I don't know how she feels, and shrug as I pull up the covers and turn over on my side. "I don't have anywhere else to be."

I'm dreaming.

It's the night I tried to save Hannu. I'm running from the aid camp into the jungle, towards Hannu's hut, desperate to get there before Ivan and my father do. I know how this ends—Hannu killed, me left for dead—but in this dream all of the naïve urgency of that night comes back to me, propelling me forward through the vines and brush, the shadows, the animal sounds.

The communicator I swiped from the hut crackles at my hip, an ominous sound. I know the other Mogadorians are closing in.

I have to get there first. I *have* to.

I arrive at a clearing in the jungle. The hut where Hannu and his Cêpan lived stands right where I remembered it. My eyes struggle to adjust to the darkness.

Then I see the difference.

The hut and the clearing itself are completely overgrown with vines and foliage. Half of the hut's façade has been blown out, and the roof sags heavily over the missing section of wall. The obstacle course at the edge of the grounds that Hannu must have used for training is so overgrown I can barely tell what it is anymore.

“I’m sorry,” comes a voice from the jungle.

I whip around. “Who’s there?”

One emerges from the trees.

“You’re sorry for what?” I’m confused, out of breath. And my feet hurt from running.

That’s when it clicks. “I’m not dreaming,” I say.

One shakes her head. “Nope.”

“You took over.” The words escape my lips before I even understand what I’m saying. But I can tell from her face I’m right: she took over my consciousness while I slept, leading me out here to the site of Hannu’s death. She’s never done this before. I had no idea she even *could* do this. But her being is so intimately enmeshed with my own at this point, I shouldn’t be surprised. “You hijacked me.”

“I’m sorry, Adam,” she says. “But I needed you to come here, to remind you . . .”

“Well, it didn’t work!” I’m confused, angered by One’s manipulation of my will.

But as soon as I say it, I know it's a lie. It *did* work.

My adrenaline's up, my heart is racing, and I feel it: the crushing importance of what I tried and failed to do months ago. The threat my people still pose to the Garde and to the rest of the world.

They must be stopped.

I turn away, so One can't see the doubt on my face.

But we share a mind. There's no hiding from her.

"I know you feel it too," she says.

She's right, but I push it away, that nagging sense that I have a calling I'm ignoring out here in Kenya. Things were just starting to get good again. I like my life in Kenya, I like that I'm making a difference, and until One dragged me out here to rub my nose in the site of Hannu's murder, it had gotten easy for me to forget about the coming war.

I shake my head. "I'm doing good work, One. I'm helping people."

"Yeah," she says. "What about doing *great*? You could be helping the Garde to save the planet! Besides, do you really think the Mogadorians will spare this place when their ultimate plan takes form? Don't you realize that any work you do in the village is just building on quicksand unless you join the fight to stop your people?"

Sensing that she's getting through to me, she steps closer. "Adam, you could be so much more."

"I'm not a hero!" I cry, my voice catching in my throat. "I'm a weakling. A defector!"

"Adam," she begs, her voice catching now too. "You know I like to tease you, and I'd really hate for you to get a big head or something. But you are one in a million. One in *ten* million. You are the only Mogadorian who has ever defied Mogadorian authority. You have no idea how special you are, how useful to the cause you could be!"

All I've ever wanted is for One to see me as special, as a hero. I wish I could believe her now. But I know she's wrong.

"No. The only thing that's special about me is you. If Dr. Anu hadn't hooked me up to your brain, if I hadn't spent three years living inside your memories . . . I'd have been the one who killed Hannu. And I'd probably have been proud of it."

I see One flinch.

Good, I think. I'm getting through to her.

“You were a member of the Garde. You had powers,” I say. “I’m just a skinny, powerless ex-Mogadorian. The best I can do is survive. I’m sorry.”

I turn around and begin my long walk back to camp.
One doesn’t follow.

CHAPTER 2

Despite my exhausting middle-of-the-night run to Hannu's hut, I manage to wake up with the other aid-workers the following morning.

"Look at you, getting up early," jokes Elswit. "Sure you want to cut into your beauty sleep?"

I almost retaliate by teasing Elswit, calling him the prince like the other workers sometimes do. He earned the nickname when he arrived here with a bunch of expensive nonessentials, none more ridiculous than a luxurious pair of shiny silk pajamas. Nobody makes fun of him to his face, though: he also brought a top-of-the-line laptop with high-tech global wireless, a device he lets us all use and that no one wants to jeopardize their access to.

As I get dressed, I notice that One is nowhere to be seen. She's usually up before I am, hanging around. I figure she's sulking from our fight in the jungle.

That, or she's just disappeared for a while. She does that sometimes. Once I asked her about it. "Where do you go when you're not here?" She gave me a cryptic look. "Nowhere" was all she said.

We step outside to begin our chores, only to find a light rain is starting. It's good for the village, but it means the water project will be suspended for the day: the soil is too difficult to work with when it's raining. So after our chores, me, Marco, and Elswit are free to loaf around, and to read or write letters.

I ask Elswit if I can have an hour with his computer. He's quick to say yes. Elswit might be a spoiled prince, but he's a generous one.

I take the laptop to the hut and begin poking around on news sites. When I get time with Elswit's laptop, I always research possible Loric or Mogadorian activities. I may have removed myself from the battle, but I'm still curious about the fate of the Garde.

It's a slow news day. I double-check to make sure that I'm alone, then open up a program I've created and installed on Elswit's laptop. I've hacked into the wireless signals from Ashwood Estates, my former home, and created a shadow directory that caches Ashwood IM and email chatter.

I wish I could claim I was motivated by some heroic agenda. But the truth is my motive is so pathetic I'd rather die than discuss it with One: I just want to find out if my family misses me.

My family. They think I'm dead. The truth is, they're probably happy about it.

I spent most of my life on earth in a gated community in Virginia called Ashwood Estates, where trueborn Mogadorians live in normal suburban houses, wearing normal American clothes, living under normal American names, hiding in plain sight. But below the granite countertops and walk-in closets and faux-marble flooring, unseen by the mortals of earth, spreads a massive network of laboratories and training facilities where trueborns and vatborn Mogs work and plot together to bring about the destruction and subjugation of the entire universe.

As the son of the legendary Mogadorian warrior Andrakkus Sutekh, I was expected to be a faithful soldier in this shadowy war. I was enlisted as a subject in an experiment to extract the memories of the first fallen Loric, the girl known as One. The plan was to use the information from those memories against her people, to help us track and exterminate the rest of her kind.

The mind-transfer experiment worked only too well: I spent three years in a coma, locked inside the memories of the dead Loric, living through her happiest and most painful moments as if they were my own.

Eventually I woke from the coma. But I came back to my Mogadorian life different, with an abiding distaste for bloodshed, a queasy but consuming sympathy for the hunted Loric, and with the ghost of One as my constant companion.

In the first of my betrayals, I lied to my people, claiming the experiment had failed and that I had no memory of my encounter with One's consciousness. I tried to change back, to be a normal, bloodthirsty Mogadorian. But with One always around me, whether as a voice in my head or a vision at my side, it became impossible to assist my people in their attacks on the Loric.

As if led by some inexorable force, I became a traitor, working against my people's efforts. I attempted to save the third Loric marked for death.

This Loric died anyway, gleefully murdered by my father right before my eyes. Despite my pathetic efforts, I failed to save him. Exposed as a traitor,

I was thrown from a ravine by Ivanick, and left for dead.

In all of my electronic snooping, I haven't been able to pinpoint any communication from my family. Maybe that's a good thing. Something tells me that it would probably just hurt my feelings.

Obviously all official communication from the underground Mogadorian facilities are firewalled well beyond my ability to hack, but the Ashwood Estates signals weren't too difficult to break into. One chink in the Mogadorian armor is their expectation of total obedience. But as a former suburban Mog kid I know that Mogadorian teenagers often flout their parents' rules and use the aboveground wireless to talk about things they're not technically supposed to.

Not that they're *that* loose lipped. The cache I've created is mostly filled with tedious emails and chats that have nothing to do with Mogadorian secrets. But the last time I logged on, I did manage to decrypt the IM chatter of a particularly bigmouthed trueborn Mog, Arsis. Apparently, this Arsis kid was demoted from combat training to a job working as an assistant technician in the labs. Arsis is so eager for information about combat ops that all he does is whine and blab to some friend from his former unit about everything he sees and does in the lab, all in the hopes that his friend will reciprocate.

So far his friend has been mum, but I've managed to learn a good deal about what's going on below Ashwood.

Arsis: It's so borrrring. Another hole day guarding the door to Dr. Zakos lab. Apperently they've got humans in their plugged into machines. I dont know if they are being tortured or what, cuz Im not even allowed inside ...

Whatever sympathy I feel for Arsis is obliterated by his atrocious spelling and grammar. It's worse than Ivan's. I didn't think such a thing was even possible.

Farther down in the transcript, I discover another detail.

Arsis:... there's only one left, and I guess he's not even awake, just plugged into machines that dredge their brains for info. Doctor

Zakos thinks tech will improve in the next few years and they will get decent intel from their brains. Whatever. It's been a hole week and all I get to do is clean the lab equipment.

I've never even heard of Dr. Zakos. I wonder if he is Dr. Anu's successor. I wonder if there's some connection between this "dredging" they are doing to the captive humans and the technology they used to hook me into One's memories. I wonder—

"What you doing?"

Startled, I realize that One has curled up beside me on the bed, a cheshire grin on her face. As nonchalantly as I can manage, I click out of my program and close the laptop.

Her grin curls into a frown. "Keeping secrets now, are we?"

"We share a brain," I say. "It's not like I can hide anything from you, even if I want to."

She's quiet for a moment, no doubt processing everything I've just learned from my snooping.

"Answer me this," she says.

I put my hands up. Shoot.

"If you're so determined not to get involved, why bother digging around at all?"

It's a good question, but I brush it off.

"Just because I'm curious doesn't mean I can do anything." I pick up the laptop and get off the bed. "I have to get this back to Elswit."

I pause in the doorway. One has a pensive, inscrutable look on her face. The only thing I can read is her continued disappointment in me.

"Sorry, One," I say, turning to go. "My answer's still no."

CHAPTER 3

The rain finally stops in the middle of the night, so the following morning after chores, Marco, Elswit, and I head back into the village on the jeep and resume our work on the well. It's muddy, which slows us down and complicates our work. As a result, I'm so involved in my job I don't even notice One's absence until I'm halfway done with the day.

I don't have her usual chatter to help pass the rest of the time, but I'm kind of relieved she's not around. I'm still haunted by the disappointed look on her face yesterday, and I could use a little time off from her judgment.

After work, me and Elswit make a yam mash for dinner, and then join a few of the other workers for a game of cards in the recreation tent. Around ten, I return to the hut. Marco's already under the covers, asleep. I undress quietly and slip into my bed, conscious of One's continued absence. It's unlike her to disappear for so long.

I scan the room, looking to see if she's tucked into some corner, hiding, but she's nowhere to be seen.

"One?" I whisper, as quietly as I can. "You there?"

No answer.

"Come on, One." A little louder this time.

"*Dude*." It's Marco. "I'm trying to sleep."

Hearing Marco say "dude" with his funny Italian accent is usually a highlight of my time at the camp. But getting caught talking to my invisible friend, I'm mortified.

"Sorry, man," I say, blushing, annoyed with One for making me raise my voice.

I still expect to see her emerge from a doorway or closet any minute, laughing at me for getting busted talking to "myself."

But she's nowhere to be seen.

I try to sleep, tossing and turning as the room fills up with the other aid-workers, one by one. But sleep doesn't come.

For all of One's comings and goings I've never gone a whole day without seeing her—not since those three years I spent plugged into her memories.

She's just always been there.

Eventually I give up trying to sleep. I half dress, put on my sandals, and shuffle out to the compound's backyard. It's surprisingly cold and I clutch my arms to my chest for warmth. It's dark outside, barely illuminated by moonlight and the dim lamp next to the latrine, and it takes me a minute for my eyes to adjust.

That's when I see her, a faint outline crouched beside the baobab tree at the center of the yard.

I approach slowly. "One?"

She looks up at me. I can't tell if it's a trick of the moonlight, but there's something strange about the way she looks: it's like she's both luminescent and too dark to see.

She remains silent. I stop in my tracks.

"Come on. This isn't funny."

"Oh," she says, laughing bitterly. "I agree. This isn't funny at all." I can tell from her voice that she's been crying. "I didn't want you to see me like this," she says.

Now I'm spooked. "See you like *what*?"

But up close I understand what she means. Her skin, her whole *being*, is strangely milky, almost translucent. I can look right through her.

"I keep disappearing," she says. "Lately it's been taking all my strength to keep myself visible."

I'm quiet, afraid to speak. But I'm also afraid to listen, afraid of what she'll say next.

She turns to me, staring right into my eyes. "Remember when I told you I went 'nowhere' when I was gone from you?"

"Yeah," I say. "I thought you were just being mysterious...."

She shakes her head, tears welling in her eyes. "I was being literal, actually. I really do go nowhere. I disappear completely." Now she's crying freely. "Each time, I can feel myself getting weaker. Less *real*. It keeps happening. I can still fight it, but it's getting harder. It feels like I'm dying all over again."

She closes her eyes. As she does, she flickers in and out of visibility. I can intermittently see the bark of the tree behind her.

"Well," she says, opening her eyes again. "Dr. Anu never promised this would last."

“One,” I begin. “What are you saying?” I ask the question even though a part of me—the One part of me—already knows the answer.

“My existence … us … this …” She gestures to the empty space between us. “You’re forgetting me, Adam.”

“That’s impossible, One. I’ll never forget you.”

She smiles sadly. “I know you’ll always *remember* me. That’s not what I’m talking about. It’s one thing to remember I existed, it’s another for me to stay alive inside of you.”

I shake my head and turn away, not following, not willing to listen.

“It’s been a while since we were connected in Anu’s lab. Too long, I guess. I’m fading. The way we are, the way we talk to each other, the way you can see me, the way I feel alive even though I died years ago. Maybe *forgetting* is the wrong way of putting it. But whatever you want to call it, this wasn’t built to last. It’s breaking down.”

Seeing how upset I’m getting, she shrugs, trying to seem casual. “We’re both going to have to accept it. My time is running out.”

“No,” I say, refusing to believe it.

But when I turn back to her, she’s already gone.

After a restless night, searching for One and eventually making my way back to the cabin alone, I drag myself out of bed. I brush my teeth, get dressed, finish my morning chores. I work in the village under the baking sun.

What choice do I have? It’s not like I can ask Marco for time off. “Hey Marco, a few months ago I emerged from a three-year coma, during which I lived inside the memories of a dead alien girl, and she’s been my constant companion ever since. But now she’s dying, this time for good.... Any chance you could cover for me at the well today?” Wouldn’t really fly. So I grit my teeth and keep working.

One is not as scarce today as she was yesterday. I saw her briefly when I woke up but she stayed far away, and she’s hanging out at the edge of camp when I return from the village, sitting against the same tree as last night.

“Don’t,” she says, as I walk over to join her. “No puppy-dog eyes, please.”

“One …” I start.

“I’m fine,” she says, interrupting me. “Yesterday was just a bad day. I’m sure I’ve got a few more weeks.”

I’m speechless, heartbroken.

“You’ve got dinner to cook.”

I balk. Dinner? Who cares about dinner when I have so little time left with her?

“You have to leave. Elswit’s giving you funny looks for talking to a tree.” She laughs, waving me off. “Go.”

I head to the kitchen. As we cook, Elswit tells me stories about his rich-kid misadventures, before he got his shit together and dedicated himself to service. Usually I find Elswit’s stories amusing, but my mind keeps drifting back to One, sitting under the tree.

This camp, the village ... these have been my sanctuary the past couple months, and it has gotten so easy to imagine a happy future for myself here. But when I look across camp to see One, flickering in and out of sight, leaning wearily against the tree, I imagine what this place feels like to her.

While her people are out there, fighting for survival, she’s stuck here for her last hours, simply because I’ve found a place where I feel safe.

I realize that to her this place isn’t a home. It’s a grave.

CHAPTER 4

I lean back in my airplane seat, staring at the passport in my hand as the jet hums somewhere over the Atlantic: ADAM SUTTON. In the photo, I'm beaming, the tooth I lost in battle with Ivan a small black gap in my smile. Looking at Adam Sutton's smiling face no one would ever know how afraid I am, what an insane risk I'm taking right now.

Elswit sits next to me, headphones on, watching some first-run blockbuster on his tablet computer while joggling his knees. The joggling is annoying, but I'm in no position to complain: Elswit came through for me big-time.

I didn't even have to come up with a grand lie for him. I just told him I had a family crisis and needed to get back to the United States. He said that was all he needed to know: he took me to the American embassy in Nairobi, paid for my new passport, and arranged for me to join him on his father's private jet, already scheduled to bring him home to Northern California for his birthday.

If I didn't already have an active American identity, none of this would've worked. Fortunately my father, "Andrew Sutton," never bothered to report me missing. I wonder what alarms my passport replacement might have set off at the Mogadorian headquarters, but I guess it doesn't make any difference. When I show up at Ashwood Estates, either they'll kill me or they won't. Knowing I'm coming shouldn't make a difference.

We touched down in London to refuel, our second refueling stop. Now we're back in the air, next stop Virginia, where I'll part ways with Elswit. At that point nothing besides a cab ride to Ashwood will stand between me and my upcoming confrontation with my family.

I sink even deeper into my seat, dreading my arrival.

"Must be scary." I turn to see One, sitting in the seat next to mine. She's been gone for most of the twenty-hour trip, off to her own private purgatory. "I can't even imagine."

Yeah, I say. I don't need to say any more: One knows what I'm thinking.

I'm about to see my family again for the first time in months. I expect to be greeted as a traitor. Maybe I'll be executed for treason: killed where I stand, or fed to a piken. Mogadorians have no particular history or protocol for handling treason; dissent is not a problem they have much, if any, experience with.

I know my only hope is to convince the General that I'm worth more to him alive than dead.

"You don't have to do this," she says, a guilty, worried expression on her face. "It's dangerous. When I talked about taking up the cause, I didn't mean this...."

This is what we have to do, I say. I sound way more certain than I feel. But I have no choice: I can't lose her.

"Once we land, we don't need to go to Ashwood. We can go anywhere, try to find the other Loric ..."

Screw the others, I say. Though my plan is vague, I know that my only hope of saving One, of keeping her by my side, lies somewhere in the laboratory beneath Ashwood Estates. *I'm not doing this for them*.

"I know," she says. "You're doing this to try and save me, to find some way to keep me alive. You think if you go back, you can *maybe* find some way into the labs. And *maybe* my body's still there, *maybe* you can reengage the mind transfer, restore me, buy me a few more years." She bites her lip, worried about the risk I'm taking. "Seems like a lot of maybes to risk your life over."

She's right. But I don't have a choice: without One, I'm nothing. Even a 1 percent chance of succeeding is worth pursuing.

In the cab on the way to Ashwood Estates, my fear is like a fist in my stomach, pushing upwards. We're getting close, maybe ten minutes away.

Nine minutes. Eight minutes.

I feel bile churning. I ask the driver to pull over to the side of the road and I rush out to the tall grass at the edge of the highway and throw up what little I've eaten since leaving Kenya.

I take a moment. To breathe, to look out over the grass to the open fields beyond. I know this is it: my last chance to run.

Then I wipe my mouth and return to the cab, grateful that One isn't around to see me like this.

"You okay, kid?" the driver asks.

I nod. "Yeah."

The driver just shakes his head and gets us back on the road.

Six minutes. Five minutes.

We enter the suburbs surrounding Ashwood Estates. Fast-food-glutted intersections give way to middle-class townships, then to upscale gated communities indistinguishable from Ashwood. The perfect hiding place.

From above we're just another suburb: no one would imagine the strange culture inside those tastefully bland McMansions, the world-destroying plans being hatched below. In all my years living at Ashwood we'd never fallen under even a moment's suspicion from the government or the local police.

As Ashwood's imposing gates loom into view up the road, I find myself darkly amused by the irony that a walled fortress has been such an effective way to deflect suspicion in suburban America.

I tell the driver to let me off across the street, passing him the last of the money that Elswit was kind enough to give me to get home.

I approach the front gate's intercom system, glad I threw up back on the highway: if I hadn't then, I would now.

There's no point being coy. I step right in front of the security camera and press the buzzer for my house and look right into the camera. Every house has a direct feed to it. I will be identified immediately.

"Adamus?" It's my mother. Her voice cracks on the second syllable, and at the sound of it my legs almost give out.

I know she's a monster. She wants nothing more than the destruction of the entire Loric race and domination of this entire planet. But the sound of her voice hits me hard: I've missed her. More than I realized.

"Mom," I say, struggling to keep my voice from breaking.

But the intercom line has gone dead.

She's probably pulled an alarm. Notified the General. Within minutes I'll be on a rack, or thrown into a piken's feeding pen ...

"Adamus?!"

Her voice again. It's not coming from the intercom.

I step around the intercom panel to see my mother in the distance through the gate. She's run out of our house at the top of the hill. She's in a sundress, the kind she wears when she's baking, running down the hill barefoot. Running towards me.

In rage? In confusion? I steel myself for her approach.

"Adam!" she cries, getting closer and closer, her bare feet slapping against the asphalt. Before I know it she's swung open the pedestrian access gate and has pulled me into her arms, hugging me, crying.

"My sweet boy, my fallen hero ... you're alive."

I'm stunned. She's not greeting me with anger. She's greeting me with love.

CHAPTER 5

I sit on our living-room couch, sipping the lemonade my mother brought me. She's talking up a storm, and I'm careful not to interrupt: I need to tread carefully, to figure out what happened here before I commit to a particular story.

"I didn't believe them," she says, sitting next to me and putting a hand on my knee. "I couldn't believe them."

I take another sip, buying myself some time. *Didn't believe them about what?*

"They told me everything and I knew it had happened, but I didn't believe it ... I knew you couldn't really be dead."

Oh. She couldn't believe *that* part.

"I've always known physical combat wasn't your gift. I told your father a thousand times you'd be better suited to a tactical role, but he was determined not to break with custom, and insisted we make no distinction between combat and strategy. Everyone must fight in the war. But when he told me you'd been killed, that that disgusting Loric had thrown you off a cliff ... it felt like my worst fears had come true."

My mind reels. It was my adopted brother Ivan who threw me into the ravine, under my father's approving gaze. I hadn't been killed by a Loric: I'd joined the Loric cause.

"They said they searched high and low for you ..."

A lie. They left me for dead.

"... that they were as heartbroken as I was ..."

More lies.

"But they didn't find your body, and that gave me some hope. I knew in my heart that somehow you had managed to survive."

She hugs me again. It takes all of my effort to receive her hug without betraying the revolution going on inside me. I expected to return home to a Mogadorian firing squad, but instead I've come back as a fallen soldier.

"No." His voice. My mother and I turn at once to see my father in the doorway, his mouth open in shock.

“He’s come back to us,” my mother exclaims. “Our boy’s alive!”

I have never in my entire life seen the General at a loss for words, but there he is, too stunned to speak.

In a flash I understand everything. My father lied to my mother. My father lied to the rest of the Mogadorians. Whether to protect his ego from disgrace or to maintain his authority as a general, or both, he fabricated an honorable death for me. No one here except my father—and Ivan, wherever he is—knows that I turned against the Mogadorian cause.

I only have a moment to act, to interpret my father’s stunned silence and play it to my advantage.

I leap off the couch and embrace him.

“I’m alive, Father.” I feel all six and a half feet of his body stiffen in disgust, but I forge ahead with my ruse. “I’ve come home.”

I tell them a story of my return to Ashwood. Washing up on the shore at the bottom of the ravine, being rescued by a local, recovering at the aid camp. I adjust the truth slightly, characterizing my human friends as fools, claiming that I deliberately manipulated Elswit for his assistance in order to get back here, painting myself as the Mogadorian loyalist I no longer am—but this version is close enough to the truth. And I know it’s what they need to hear.

“I had to get back here to see you,” I conclude. “To keep serving the cause.”

I force myself to stare right into my father’s eyes. It takes all of my effort not to flinch from his gaze, just as I know it’s taking all of his will not to lunge across the coffee table and strangle me where I stand.

In the kitchen, the oven timer dings. My mother, clucking over my heroic and daring escape, excuses herself to check on whatever is in the oven.

“So ...” I say to my father, waiting for his reaction.

He says nothing but jumps at me, gathering my shirt in his fist and lifting me off the ground. I hover inches from the floor, held tight by his grip.

His face, getting redder every second, glowers before mine. “Tell me why I shouldn’t break your neck right this instant.”

“If you wanted the truth to come out, wanted people to know how I failed you, you wouldn’t have bothered to lie to everyone.” My twisted collar is

beginning to cut off my oxygen. I force myself to keep talking. “How’d you convince Ivan to keep your secret?”

He ignores my question. “If you think having this over me will keep you safe, you are sorely mistaken. If I killed you now, the only person I’d have to tell the truth to is your mother.” He gives me a violent shake. “She’d learn to accept it. She’d have no choice.”

My heart seizes: I know he’s serious. He could kill me. He *wants* to kill me.

I quickly switch tacks, hoping I’m not too late.

“I’m sorry, General.” Channeling my own mortal terror, I will repentant tears to my eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

He looks at me with renewed contempt: the sight of his son groveling for his life is probably as hard for him as the sight of me turning against the cause. I know my new tactic is as risky as my old one: he could just as easily kill me out of disgust as out of anger.

But I keep going. This is the only gambit I have.

“I failed you and I failed my people. I’m a coward. I don’t have what it takes to kill. On the field of battle I ... I couldn’t stand to see bloodshed.”

My father releases my shirt and I drop hard to the floor.

“I knew coming back was a risk. That I might be justifiably executed for treason. But I thought it was worth it.”

“Why?”

“Because,” I say, pausing for dramatic effect, scrambling back onto my feet. “I hoped you would give me a chance to make up for my failure.”

“And how do you propose to do that?”

I fix my shirt and give him the most unblinking stare I can muster. “Clearly, I don’t have what it takes to be a warrior. I’m not like Ivan.”

At that, my father lets out a derisive snort. “Son, you are unworthy of even an unflattering comparison to Ivanick.”

“But I am a better tactician. Ivan never would’ve gotten through his early studies if I hadn’t been there to do his work for him, every step of the way.”

The General’s not even looking at me anymore: he’s staring towards the kitchen, no doubt preparing himself for the explanation he’ll have to give my mother once he’s killed me. I can see I’m losing him. Yet I press on, trying not to let my desperation show.

“I found Number Two first. Back in London, well before your entire team of surveyors managed to pinpoint her location. And in Kenya I got to Number Three ahead of Ivan. I didn’t have the will to kill them myself, but I found them first. I could be one of the best trackers you have if you just give me a chance—”

My father lunges at me again, grabbing me by the throat this time. I can’t breathe.

This is it, I think. This is the end.

“One week,” he says. “I’ll give you one week to show me what you can do.”

He releases me.

“And if you fail to produce a miracle for me in that time ...” He trails off. I can tell from his look he expects me to finish his statement.

“You’ll kill me.”

His level stare confirms that I’ve guessed right.

I nod, accepting his terms.

CHAPTER 6

I lie in my old bed, in my old bedroom, staring at the wall. I was surprised to find everything just as I left it, half-expecting it to be stripped bare following my supposed “death.” I guess my mother won *that* battle with the General.

I try to get comfortable. After months on a bare cot at the aid camp, my expensive pillow-top mattress should feel unbelievably fluffy and soft. But it feels like a bed of nails.

After a strained dinner, during which my father and I both pretended to be happy I was home, alone in my room I can finally let my guard down and drop the fake smile. I’m exhausted and scared. Even if I somehow manage to avoid being executed within the trial week the General has granted me, that’s no guarantee I’ll manage to break into the labs. And even if I do, that’s no guarantee I’ll find a successful means of reviving One, of keeping her imminent disappearance at bay. And even if I manage to save her, I have no plan for how to save myself, for how to escape this place once I’m done.

I’ll need to figure that out, because right now death doesn’t even feel like the worst-case scenario. Passing my father’s test and being “allowed” to remain in this place, having to indefinitely maintain the pretense of being a loyal Mogadorian, feels like the grimdest fate of all.

“That was hard to watch.” One appears, standing in the doorway.

I sigh, grateful for her presence.

“Didn’t realize you were there.”

She ambles towards me and sits at the foot of the bed. “I hung back. Tried to stay out of your line of sight. Figured you needed to focus.” She gives me an affectionate look. “Performance of a lifetime, huh?”

“You said it.”

She looks guilty, worried for my safety. “You sure I’m worth it?”

I manage to fake a confident smile. “Definitely.”

My bedroom door opens and my sister Kelly swings in.

Surprised, I hop off the bed.

“So you’re back,” she says bluntly, sizing me up.

“Yeah,” I say. I’m not sure if I should rush up and embrace her.

I decide to wait and follow her lead.

“Well, that’s good, I guess.” She fiddles with the doorknob hesitantly.

“You weren’t at dinner.” Over dinner my father explained that Ivan had been promoted to a new position somewhere in the Southwest—news that filled me with such relief I had to cover my mouth so the General wouldn’t see how happy I was—but I hadn’t been given a reason for Kelly’s absence.

“Ran late. I’m doing an afterschool program at the Nursery now.” The Nursery is what some of us call the piken pens in the underground complex. Pikens are bred in the labs down there and conditioned for combat. “I think I’m going to be a trainer when I graduate. They say I have what it takes.”

“Oh,” I reply. “That’s great.”

I can’t believe how dumb I sound, how tentative. Back in the hornets’ nest of Ashwood, and I’m scared of my own kid sister. It’s pathetic.

“Whatever,” she says. “So listen. Congratulations on surviving and stuff, and for coming back here. But, you know, having you dead was embarrassing enough. Now I have to explain to my friends that my loser brother is back. You’re basically ruining my life.”

I’m stunned by her callousness, but I understand. In Mogadorian society, dying in combat is not afforded the prestige it is among most human cultures. And *failing* in combat and surviving is hardly better than being a traitor. My mother’s relief at my survival won’t be shared by my sister … or anyone else at Ashwood.

“I’m just telling you this so when I ignore you in front of the others, you don’t freak out, okay?”

“Fair enough,” I say.

“Okay,” she says.

She leaves, without a good night, much less that hug.

I shoot One a despairing look.

She quickly covers her expression of pity with one of her best, most sarcastic grins. “Welcome home, Adamus,” she says.

CHAPTER 7

A kid a little older than me named Serkova comes to get me in the morning. According to the General, he's a promising young surveyor in the Media Surveillance division. My father assigned him to bring me up to speed and put me to work.

We ride the elevator down to the underground complex together. He gives me a sidelong glance. "Heard you bit it in Kenya."

"Yeah," I concede, feigning sheepishness.

"And now you're angling for a position as a surveyor?"

"That's the idea," I say.

He snorts. Serkova has a generic trueborn face, but there is something gross and oddly piggish about his nose that's even grosser when he snorts.

"I didn't know we were in the business of giving failed soldiers second chances." He turns his stare on me. "Guess there's an exception for the General's son."

The elevator doors open and we stride into the hub at the center of the underground complex. The domed ceiling and orb-like fluorescent light fixture give it the feel of a massive—and massively ugly—atrium.

Trueborns and vatborns stride in every direction in and out of the various tunnels radiating out from the hub. I feel them react to my presence: the trueborns avoid my gaze, while the vatborns sneer at me with naked contempt. Word sure traveled fast, even down here.

We make our way past the entrances to the Southeast and Northeast tunnels on our way to the Northwest tunnel. With the exception of the General's briefing room, I've never been granted access to any of the tunnels off the hub before. But it's fairly common knowledge that the tunnels lead in one direction to combat training facilities, and in the other direction to weapons stores and bunkers for the vatborn. We're heading down a third tunnel, to the R+D laboratories and the media and surveillance compounds.

I struggle to keep pace with Serkova. It's obvious he doesn't like me and resents being saddled with the job of babysitting me.

“What’s your problem with me?” I genuinely want to know: the Mogadorian worldview has become foreign to me so quickly. “So I’m being given a second chance. Why should you care?”

Serkova turns to me, a contemptuous sneer on his lips. “You think I don’t get enough shit as it is from the combat Moggs for being a surveyor? They already call us tech wienies. Now we’re being forced to take on a *proven* loser in combat. So the next time they say we’re only surveyors because we’re not good enough for combat, they’ll be *right*. All thanks to you.”

Great.

I follow him into the Media Surveillance facility, a large room lit only by the screens of the twenty or so computer monitors throughout the room. No one looks up as Serkova leads me to my monitor. Thanks to his outburst, I don’t have to wonder why.

He explains to me what our job is, then sits down at the console next to mine. “Good luck, Adamus,” he says, with evident sarcasm, then gets to work.

I turn to my monitor.

A steady stream of links scrolls across my screen, in color-coded text. The Mogadorian mainframe scours satellite and cable TV, radio transmissions, and every last corner of the internet, 24/7. A certain amount of automated culling occurs before these links reach our screens: most human interest stories are weeded out in advance, as are most articles or news segments devoted to U.S. or international politics. But a significant majority of what remains—weather reports, natural-disaster coverage, police blotters—makes it to our screens as a veritable geyser of hyperlinks.

Our job is to sift through the links on our respective screens and sort them, moving material that is clearly of no pertinence to the Mogadorian cause to the “Discard” directory, while kicking material that *might* have some bearing on our interests up to the “Investigate” directory, where it will be assessed personally by the lead surveyor before being dismissed or moved up the chain to Command HQ. We are also supposed to tag and grade the material we move to the “Investigate” directory according to our judgment of its possible relevance: “PV” for Possible Value, “HP” for High Priority, and “EHP” for Extremely High Priority. Items we flag with an “EHP” rating are simultaneously routed to the lead surveyor and to a small cadre of analysts over at command HQ for immediate review.

Ultimately, if Command HQ is persuaded a news item is a legitimate sign of Garde activity, reconnaissance teams are dispatched.

All three eliminated Garde members were located with some degree of surveyor assistance. But despite our importance, we're really just data monkeys. Exciting stuff like reconnaissance and combat occur outside our purview as surveyors.

Not that it's easy work. Within minutes of struggling through this endlessly updating data stream, I miss the clarity and simplicity of my physical labor back in Kenya. Jumping all over the place on the internet—from a story about the birth of quintuplets in Winnetka, Illinois, to a grainy web-video from a Syrian insurgent—without getting involved in what I'm reading or seeing is a challenge, and after just twenty minutes of wide-eyed staring at the monitor, my eyes feel like they're going to bleed.

Then it gets worse.

At the end of the first hour, a little digital bell sounds and a tab pops up on the upper right-hand corner of my screen. My heart sinks.

"Oh yeah," says Serkova, managing to smirk at me without looking up from his monitor. "I forgot to mention. We get ranked hourly."

Our individual results are tabulated at the end of every hour and broadcast to all the terminals. Number of Discards, number of Investigates, as well as a provisional computer-graded percentage score for accuracy.

There I am, all the way at the bottom, in last place: twenty-seven Discards, six Investigates, and a provisional accuracy ranking of 71 percent. I scan up the list to see Serkova in second place, with a whopping eighty-two discards, thirteen Investigates, and a provisional accuracy ranking of 91 percent. I'm going to have to go *a lot* faster.

"What was that you were telling your father?" Serkova cracks.

I'm too distracted to respond. I need to improve my score, and I resent Serkova's ability to work and needle me at the same time.

"Something 'bout what a great tracker you are, how much better you'll be at surveying than we are?"

Ugh. Not only has the General given me an impossible task, in which failure will result in my *death*, he's also poisoned the well with my new coworkers by reporting what I said about my superior tracking skills.

But I don't bother to respond: I don't have time.

I get back to work, fighting against my own dismay. One reason I manipulated the General into placing me in the Media and Surveillance facility was because I thought I might have enough downtime to use my console to hack into the servers of the adjacent laboratories, do some digging into Dr. Zakos's research. I know that One's only hope lies in those files. But if I don't pull my ranking up soon, my father could justifiably terminate our agreement: I'd be killed before I even got a chance to help One.

I need to improve my score.

I manage to go faster. The trick, I learn, is not to process any of the information I encounter. Instead I let my consciousness skim just above the text or video, then let my judgment occur without thought or reasoning. Basically the trick is to accept that I am just a cog in a data-combing machine.

Finally, I feel myself getting into a groove. In the next hourly ranking, I've climbed two positions. In the one after that, I'm position thirteen out of twenty.

"Luck." Serkova sniffs.

I glare at him. I know I'm not here to compete with this jerk, but I can't help it: wanting to knock him down a peg drives me on. By late afternoon, I've climbed up to position eleven.

I figure I've bought myself enough of a cushion to give myself five minutes of snoop time. I quickly page away from the hyperlinks and try to access the hub's central servers.

But doing research with a ticking clock hanging over my head proves disastrous. I enter in searches for phrases like "mind transfer," "Dr. Anu," and "Dr. Zakos," but they all lead me to restricted areas on the server, and I don't have time to hack into them. I try to be more general. Remembering what Arsis said about humans in the lab, I do a search for "human captives." Instead of directing me to anything about Anu or Zakos's research subjects, I'm led to some internal, hub-wide memo about a broad new policy regarding human captives. "Whenever possible, humans suspected of aiding and abetting the Garde shall henceforth be held at the government base in Dulce, New Mexico."

A government base? Why would the U.S. government have anything to do with the Mogadorians?

I put it aside for now. It's an interesting—and unsettling—tidbit, but it's not going to help me save One. Before I even have a chance to enter a new search, my five minutes is up.

I turn back to my work. Predictably, that short diversion cost me, and my hourly rank plummets. Regretfully, I accept that I can't afford any more "independent research" today.

We finish at seven p.m., replaced by the night shift, who we'll relieve at seven tomorrow morning. My body aches from remaining hunched and sedentary, and my eyes feel like they've been blasted with sand. I've finished the day back in the middle, at position eleven.

"Not bad," admits Serkova, getting up from his chair. "But hardly what you promised the General."

He's right. Landing right in the middle of a group of twenty can hardly qualify me as a master tracker. I can only hope my ranking is enough to let me live another day.

I walk the tunnel alone, heading back to the hub.

I'm too tired to even consider sneaking off and snooping around the other tunnels: I'd definitely blow my cover.

"Arsis, you flaming moron!"

Arsis! The idiot assistant technician in the labs. Advancing my secret agenda was the last thing on my mind until I heard that name.

"Sorry, Doctor."

I round the corner to see an open doorway leading into one of the laboratories. Inside the gleaming white lab, an incredibly tall and spindly doctor has a young guard backed up against a wall, prodding him with an angry index finger.

"These samples were supposed to be refrigerated at *subzero* temperatures. You put them in the regular freezer."

"Sorry, sir." The boy is docile, subservient, nothing like the sullen brat I'd imagined from his IM transcripts.

The doctor commands him sternly. "Revial the samples from our remaining cultures, and get it right this time. You asked to be trusted with more important work; now show that you can do it properly."

"Yes, Doctor." Arsis scrambles off to redo his work.

I stand gaping at Dr. Zakos, at his massive laboratory. This is the man who might be able to save my only friend.

He catches me looking.

Shit.

He glares at me. I either have to turn around and walk away, or think of something fast.

“Doctor Zakos?” I say, deciding to wing it.

“Yes?” He looks puzzled.

I step forward into the lab.

“I’m Adamus Sutekh. Son of General Sutekh.”

He looks at me, evidently suspicious.

“I wanted to meet you,” I go on, “because my father has spoken so highly of your work.”

My ruse pays off: I watch Dr. Zakos flush with pride. Even Mogadorians have their vanity. An exploitable weakness.

“I’m glad the General is satisfied,” says the doctor, giving a little involuntary bow.

“I was actually a subject in your predecessor’s experiments,” I continue. “The work he did with the first fallen member of the Garde … the memory transfer …”

“Ah, of course.” He shakes his head. “Dr. Anu’s work was a deplorable failure. I’m certain the mind-transfer technology I have been developing since is much improved, if I could ever get clearance to actually use it.”

I’m confused. Zakos keeps talking, looking at me with much more interest now. I struggle to maintain a neutral expression. “You’re saying the procedure could be done more successfully now?”

He nods. “That’s my theory.”

“How is that possible? I thought the procedure needed to be done soon after a subject’s death.”

He cocks his head curiously and ignores my question. “Where have you been since the experiment?”

“In Africa,” I tell him. I don’t want to get into too much detail about my activities since I was last with the Mogadorians. But the doctor seems to accept my answer without question.

“And did you suffer any … side effects due to the procedure you underwent?”

I'm tempted to be sarcastic. *Only that little coma.* But I hold back.
"Nothing other than those that you already know about."

The wheels seem to be turning in his head as he looks me up and down.

"It's a possibility," he muses, almost as if to himself. "The neural pathways of the Garde have been dormant far too long to attempt the transfer again with a new host. But with the original subject, from the original experiment—"

I can't help interjecting. "What are you talking about? What Garde? You can't mean *her*."

Dr. Zakos just grins and struts over to the laboratory's wall, which is covered with ten or so off-white square tiles. He places his hand over a small steel control panel next to the wall and performs an elegant sequence of hand gestures across the panel's surface. With a sudden and jarring hydraulic whoosh, one of the tiles slides out of the wall, opening like a drawer, spewing cryogenic vapors.

It's like a mortuary slab.

He stares down proudly at what's lying on it.

"Have a look," he says.

I step deeper into the lab, peering over the edge of the tile.

"Perfectly preserved."

I can't believe my eyes. She doesn't even look dead: she looks like she's sleeping.

My best friend in the world.

One.

CHAPTER 8

One keeps me up half the night, bombarding me with questions I can't answer: about Doctor Zakos's experiments, about what he meant when he said he could successfully download the entirety of One's memories, about what it meant that her body had been so thoroughly well preserved.

"Well, you're still dead," I say.

"Uh? A little tact, please," she says, laughing.

I'm in bed. She's sitting on the floor in the corner of my bedroom.

"Sorry," I say. I'm a bit rattled. Seeing her in the flesh like that, a corpse on a cold steel slab, has upset me more than I'd like her to know. She's been my constant companion for years now, but the sight of her body brought home to me how tenuous her current existence is.

"Did you notice?" asks One, jumping right back into her excited speculation. "There were at least ten tiles on that wall. Remember what that Arsis kid said in those chats? About humans being dredged for intel? You think they're being kept preserved on those slabs too?"

I marvel at One's mind. She wasn't even present until I finished reading Arsis's IM transcripts, and she was definitely gone when I was in Zakos's lab.

She clocks my amazed look. "What?" she says. "You already know your mind's an open book to me. Just because I'm gone when stuff happens doesn't mean I can't see it once I come back."

And without skipping a beat, she returns to her obsession. "Anyhow, if I've been so well preserved, that means we can probably jack into each other again somehow and kick-start my memories inside you. I mean, I know I'm pretty, but I don't think Dr. Zakos has been preserving me for my looks. He must've been doing it to keep the stuff inside my brain, like, fresh." She nods, pleased with her reasoning. "We need to get back into that lab."

I look away from her. "One, what I need is to get some sleep." It's the middle of the night, and I have to be at the media facility in four hours.

One is silent.

“If I screw up at work, I’m as good as dead. And if I’m dead, you’re dead, and this whole lab plan will be moot anyway. Okay?”

I turn back to One. But she’s gone.

It occurs to me that I’ll never know when one of her disappearances is her last. One day she’ll blink out, just like this, and I’ll wait for her to reappear ... but she won’t.

For all I know I just saw her for the last time.

I force my face deep into my pillow and try to sleep.

I arrive at my console the next morning groggy and bleary-eyed, dreading the next twelve hours. I take my seat next to Serkova and dive into the data stream.

Despite my fuzzy head, I pull a decent rank after my first hour. But with exhaustion creeping up on me, I can feel my productivity beginning to slip. By the fifteen-minute mark of the next hour, I know I’m headed back to the bottom of the pack.

So I come up with a little trick.

For every five or so sources I legitimately review, I automatically throw another one in the Discard directory. I know my provisional accuracy percentage will take a hit, but from what I can tell it carries a relatively low weight on overall ranking compared to Discard and Investigate totals.

Using this technique I’ve climbed all the way to number six by the next hourly rankings, with seventy-three Discards and seventeen Investigates. My provisional accuracy is 73 percent, lower than the hour before but not bad enough to raise any red flags.

I can feel Serkova sneering at me. I don’t bother to hide my smile.

I pass the day like this, racing against Serkova. Giving up on finding time for research, I use the task in front of me to distract myself from everything: from One’s perilous condition, from Zakos’s strange work in the lab, from my hateful father, from what the work I’m doing even means. My only goal is to get ahead of Serkova in at least one hourly ranking.

My last rank of the day is number two. Right ahead of Serkova at three.

“Better luck tomorrow, Serkova,” I say, wearing a bright, fake-friendly smile.

He curses me and heads out of the lab.

After work, I head upstairs to my room to wash up before dinner. My mother told me Kelly's skipping dinner again for her afterschool program in the Nursery. Yeah, right. I know the real reason: she doesn't want to share a table with me.

But not even that can get me down: beating Serkova, even just the once, was too big a victory. I find myself racing up the stairs to my room, three steps at a time.

I open the door to my room, hoping to find One. I can't wait to crow to her about kicking Serkova's ass. When I enter, I see her feet peeking out from behind the corner of the bed.

"One?"

I step closer.

She's flat on her back on the carpet. Mouth and eyes open. She looks glazed, and her skin is doing that milky flickering thing that it did back under the baobab tree. Only much, much worse.

"What happened?" I crouch beside her on the floor. She's silent. "One?"

After a moment's silence, she speaks. "Nothing." Her lips barely move and her voice is raspy. "It's just that each time it's darker than the last time. It hurts more, it's more ... obliterating." Her eyes swim around in her head, searching for me.

Her gaze finally finds mine. "It's like, what's blacker than black, you know?"

"Yeah," I say.

But I *don't* know. She's going through something I have no experience with. She's going through the End.

I hear my mother call me for dinner.

I turn back to One. "I'm going to stay with you."

She shakes her head, almost imperceptibly.

"No," she says. "You should go." Her eyes drift back to the ceiling as she lies there, flickering in and out of view.

Heartbroken, I leave.

My father joins my mother and me for dinner. He barely speaks, except to ask my mother for seconds—he has a true warrior's appetite—and to give us an update on Ivan. "His superior officer says Ivan is doing excellent work. Says he has the makings of a general, himself."

“That’s wonderful,” says my mother, beaming approvingly. “Does he know the good news about Adamus?”

My father and I exchange a quick, uneasy glance.

The General wipes his mouth with a napkin. “No.”

“Why not?” she says, looking back and forth between the two of us. “I think he’d be happy to hear his brother is alive.”

“Adamus is *not* Ivanick’s brother,” my father says, silencing her.

Technically that’s true—I’m their biological son and Ivanick was adopted, raised by my parents—but I catch the General’s subtext. Saying I am not Ivanick’s brother is my father’s way of saying that I am unworthy of being honored that way, that I am less their son than even Ivan. My father steps into the kitchen, leaving me and my mother alone in awkward silence.

The truth is, I’m too upset about One’s worsening fades to even care about the hateful soap opera of my family life.

“You’ve barely touched your plate, Adamus.” My mother looks at me with concern. “Is something upsetting you?”

The question is so ridiculous, given the circumstances, I almost laugh. I almost say, “Yes, Mother. Everything is upsetting me.” But I bite my tongue.

I hear One’s voice from last night. “*We need to get back in that lab.*”

She’s right. She’s fading so fast I need to convince Dr. Zakos to try the procedure again if she’s going to have any hope of living. But how can I convince my father to let me go, to grant me leave of my temporary position in the surveillance facility?

“Adamus?”

“I’m just afraid,” I say. I don’t know where I’m going with this, but I see it, the dim outline of a new card to play.

“Afraid?” my mother asks. “Afraid of what?”

“Of Father. I’m afraid he’ll make me ...” My voice trails off dramatically. I force myself to look as stricken, as ghostly with fear, as I can.

“What are you saying—”

And then I blurt it out. I explain to my mother that I ran into Dr. Anu’s replacement in the Northwest tunnel the other day and he said that he could do the mind-transfer procedure again.

“He says it’ll work this time. That they can’t do it to just anyone, it has to be me. And I’m afraid, I don’t want to go back into the labs and be hooked

up to machines. I'm afraid I'll go into another coma or—or ... worse!" I will tears to my eyes. "He says he can dig up real information about the Garde if they do it, and I think the General will make me ..." "

"Oh Adamus, I doubt that—"

I interrupt her, louder than before. "But he will! If the General finds out, I'm sure he will!"

Then I hear his low deep voice, coming from behind me.

"If he finds out what, exactly?"

It's the General. Taking my bait.

CHAPTER 9

“Have a seat, get comfortable.” Dr. Zakos has positioned a large curved chair in the center of the room and gestures for me to get in. Nervously I take a seat.

“I was delighted to hear from your father last night,” he says, flitting around the laboratory, putting monitors in place, booting up scary-looking medical equipment. “But with the short notice, it might take me a while to get this equipment up and running.”

I can tell he’s ecstatic to use the equipment on me. Adamus, the Mogadorian lab rat.

I sink into the chair, trying to get comfortable while Zakos sets up. I should be happy: my ruse worked. I deliberately let my father overhear that I didn’t want to be used in Zakos’s mind-transfer experiments, and he had Zakos on the phone within minutes, giving him the go ahead to plug my brain into One’s corpse.

The General still hates me, and seeing me weak and afraid, as I’d pretended to be at the dinner table, gave his meager conscience whatever license it needed to risk my life again in the lab.

The General is free to hate me. I hate him too. And now that I’ve succeeded in tricking him again, my hatred has a new depth, a new dimension: contempt. I fooled him.

The machines begin to whir.

I’m afraid of what will happen while I’m under, but push that aside. More than anything else, I’m relieved to know that One may have a chance of survival. If the technology has improved, maybe I can get through the procedure unharmed, rescuing One in the process.

“The transfer rig will take about twenty minutes to warm up,” Zakos announces.

I nod as I watch the doctor approach the steel console beside the tile containing One’s body. He presses a few buttons and the slab comes out with the same hydraulic whoosh as before.

From where I'm sitting I can't see One's body. Zakos presses a few buttons on the edge of One's slab, then presses the console again. The slab whooshes shut.

"You don't need ..." I start, then catch myself before I call her One. "You don't need to connect the body to me?"

"No," he says, with professional pride. "All of the containment pods are linked to this mainframe terminal," he says, pointing at the largest monitor. "Everything besides the pods' hydraulics are controlled through here: brain scans, vitals, preservation protocols ..."

"Do you have other bodies in there?" I ask.

"Yes," he says. "Quite a few. Some of them are unaffiliated mortals I've used for experimentation. The rest of them are Greeters."

Zakos, oblivious to the fact that I'm a traitor to the Mogadorian cause, explains to me that when the Loric were first scouting for a planet where they could hide from the Mogadorians, they made contact with a few scattered mortals. The Mogadorians captured these humans almost ten years ago and subjected them to a series of interrogations. However, Mogadorians knew next to nothing about earthling psychology or behavior back then, and at that point our interrogation techniques were quite crude. Some of these "Greeters" caved to Mogadorian interrogation, but it was quickly discovered the intel they gave—about the Loric's locations, what they told the Greeters upon contact—was often faulty. Because of this, my people began an ongoing research endeavor that used complex brain-mapping technology to find a more accurate means of extracting information. In other words, rather than asking for it, we tried to find a way to take it.

"And, as a matter of fact, Anu's experiment with you was an offshoot of that research. Unfortunately it failed, but I was intrigued. The procedure you are about to undergo represents a massive refinement of his work."

I can tell that Zakos thinks this little history lesson is complete, but I want to know more.

"And you've kept these Greeters alive this whole time?"

Zakos gives a breezy laugh. "Not exactly. We've raked their brains so thoroughly trying to extract information about the Garde that all but one of them have perished. Of course we're keeping the others preserved, should our technology advance to the point—"

“Who lived?” I ask, interrupting him, steering him back to information I know One will want, should both of us survive the procedure.

Dr. Zakos looks at me silently for a moment. For a second, I worry that I’ve raised his suspicions.

Instead, he impishly raises an eyebrow. “Want to see?”

He dashes over to a panel next to another tile and opens the containment pod. After the mist clears, I crane my neck to get a better look.

I see a handsome, solidly built middle-aged man. His skin is shockingly white from being in containment for so long: it’s practically the color of vatborn skin. But otherwise he looks healthy. His eyes are closed.

“Just one moment,” Zakos says, pressing a few buttons inside the pod. Then Zakos leans over the man.

“Malcolm Goode?” he says, addressing him gently, like a normal human doctor addressing a normal human patient. “How’s it going in there?”

Malcolm Goode opens his eyes.

I feel a chill, a wave of nauseating pity for this poor human, trapped in a cold box for years on end.

“Hello,” he says, looking up at Dr. Zakos with an expression of utter guilelessness and trust. It’s like he has no idea how much time has passed, or what he’s been subjected to. “I seem to have forgotten where I am,” he says, smiling innocently. “Could you tell me where I am?”

Dr. Zakos only chuckles in response. “Well,” he says, addressing me. “You get the idea.”

And with that he reaches over to the panel, presses a few more buttons, and Malcolm is prompted—whether by wire or chemical—to return to sleep. But not before he fixes me with a haunted, quizzical look.

I’m under. At first it’s just a void, a black so black I wonder for a moment if this is what One experiences when she disappears. Then come blasts of light and crackling static, as I find myself plunged into One’s memories.

I look around, getting my bearings. I’m in a wooden shack, in bed, my head hanging over the side of the mattress. Through the cracks in the floorboards, I see rushing water: a river.

The Rajang River.

“They’re coming.”

I turn to see Hilde, One's Cêpan. She's staring through a slat in the door, ready to fight. She rushes to me, shaking me, pulling me out of bed.

That's when I realize I'm not just a spectator to One's final memories, as I was during most of my time in her consciousness. I've been plugged *directly* into her experience. Ghost-One is nowhere to be seen. I'm completely fused with her: every thought, every feeling. The humidity inside the shack. The sweat trickling down my back. I can feel Hilde's eyes on me, inspecting my readiness for combat.

I'm not ready, I think. I'm just scared.

The Mogadorian assault team kicks in the door and Hilde leaps into action. She dodges a Mog's knife, and as the Mog spins around to recover his balance she crushes his windpipe with a single strike. As he collapses, she whirls to another Mog, swiftly snapping his neck.

I'm too paralyzed with fear to move. I know what's coming. Hilde is about to die.

My heart screams. I love this woman with all of One's love.

Another Mogadorian attacks. Hilde flips him onto his back.

But this Mog is quicker than the others. He unholsters his blaster and shoots Hilde right in her chest.

Everything goes red. All of One's anger, shock, and rage at the loss of her Cêpan—*my Cêpan*—floods my system. *No, she can't, they couldn't. It's my fault, I failed, how could I?* These are One's thoughts but I feel them, hear them, as my own. *I want her back. I want her back. No no no! Must pay, someone must pay, they must pay.* Our combined fury rises. *They will pay, yes they will pay, we will make them pay.*

And that's when I feel it. Something ripping open inside of me, something so entirely new yet so strangely familiar that it's almost funny I never noticed it before, that it took this crisis for me to notice it. The floors start to shake, a massive rumble coming from beneath my feet but also coming from inside me. And as my heart sings—*yes, they will pay, they will pay*—everything goes black and—

Shadows. Hands waving in front of my face, fluorescent light burning through the dark.

I am back in Zakos's lab. He's cursing, ripping electrodes from my head, adjusting the console I'm plugged into.

"What happened?" I ask.

I'm still buzzing from what I've just experienced. As chaotic as the memory transfer was, as turbulent as it felt, there was something I was on the verge of understanding inside it, a promise of something great.

But now that I'm back, it's gone.

"Your vitals were spiking faster than I'd anticipated. If I'd kept going ..." He lets out another string of curses.

I sit up in my chair.

He stares at me. "Are you able to recall anything? Do you have any usable intel I can send up the chain?"

I shake my head.

Of course I'm lying. Beyond what I just experienced, I already have an intimate knowledge of Loric psychology, the relationship between the Garde and their Cépan. I have the entirety of One's history burned into my brain. I've had that ever since the first transfer.

He levels me with his stare. He's evidently flustered, his hair damp with sweat, but that doesn't make him any less scary.

"I know it's in there," he says.

I feel a chill at his words.

"You may not remember it consciously, but I know it's in there, in your brain. And I know that I could get it," he says.

The way he speaks, it's like he's talking to himself. "Our understanding of Mogadorian physiology is well beyond what we understand about Loric or mortals. With my neurological mapping techniques, I could do what Anu couldn't. Run those currents three times as hard, and rip that intel straight from your brain and onto my hard drive."

He stares at me. I feel weirdly exposed, objectified, like a slab of meat at a butcher shop.

"But for that," he says, chuckling bitterly, "I'd need your father's permission to kill you."

CHAPTER 10

I'm dismissed to finish out my day at the surveillance facility. I have no fight left in me, and my rankings take a nosedive. Sixteen, eighteen, eighteen, twenty. Last place.

I know Dr. Zakos immediately reported the experiment's failure to my father, but I doubt he took the risk of pitching his idea of mentally vivisecting me to the General. I have two more days left in the lab before my father decides if my results qualify me for survival. Either he will have me executed, or he will deem me an asset to the cause and allow me to continue working as a surveyor. *Oh joy.*

After the lab it's another miserable dinner. The General is busy down in his briefing room, so it's just my mother and Kelly. Kelly refuses to even look at me. When my mother goes to the kitchen, I turn to her, try to start a conversation. We haven't been close since before the mind transfer, almost five years ago. I wonder if she can even remember back then, when she hated Ivan for teasing her and roughhousing with her, and seemed to adore me, her gentle older brother.

"Haven't seen you in the tunnels," I say. "How are things going in the Nursery?"

She is silent, slowly chewing her food and staring straight ahead. It's hard to believe a fourteen-year-old girl could be so full of such a steely hatred.

"Kelly, I'm sorry if it's embarrassing that I survived, that you have to explain that your loser brother has come back—"

"Ivanick told me," she says, hissing at me suddenly. "He told me the truth about you. I know what Mom doesn't. You're a traitor."

My stomach does a somersault. I feel like I could throw up my entire dinner.

"So you can pretty much stop trying to make up with me. It's not going to happen." She gets up from the table.

"I wish you were dead," she says, before running up the stairs to her room and slamming the door shut.

"Good night to you too," I say, laughing miserably to myself.

After dinner I go up to my room. One isn't there. I haven't seen her since last night.

Somehow, this doesn't surprise me. The mind transfer was so fast, and so quickly aborted that I doubt it did much to reestablish her foothold in my consciousness. Perhaps that's the thing I felt like I was on the verge of understanding—how to keep her alive inside of me.

It's funny to think Zakos thought he was covering his ass with the General by protecting my life. If Zakos had killed me, my father probably would've given him a medal.

I have nothing to stay up for. I go to bed early.

Sleepless in bed, I consider the pitiful irony of my current situation. I came back here to rescue my one and only friend in the world, yet I fail to save her, just as I failed to save Hannu. If she isn't gone for good, she will be soon enough. And now I'm stuck here, trapped.

Alone.

A desultory day at work. I'm pulling in rankings in the thirteen-to-fifteen range. Pathetic.

I've scaled back on my "Discard" trick. Why bother trying to impress anyone with my rankings, anyway? So I actually investigate each link that's fed to my monitor, even though it damages my productivity. At least it's more interesting than mindlessly shuttling the leads into one folder or another.

I click on a link.

This one leads to a forum dedicated to readers of some publication called "They Walk Among Us." The Mogadorian mainframe has isolated a thread titled "NEXT ISSUE?" posted by a user TWAUFAN182. A threaded dialogue unfolds when I click on it.

Please I've read TWAU no. 3 so many times. Please tell me when next ish will come out? Thanks! ☺—TWAUFAN182

Sorry TWAUFAN. No plans for issue #4 yet, but be assured we have plenty material for one. Thanks for reading.—admin

What? What material? U can't leave us hanging like that! Spill it!—TWAUFAN182

Come on man, give us a hint!!!—TWAUFAN182
It's been weeks with no updates. This forum is dead, RIP. LOL.
—TWAUFAN182

That exchange was dated a year ago. Then, this morning ...

Sorry. Been busy. We've made contact, definitely extraterrestrial. True MOG in captivity.—admin

I almost gasp. There are humans out there who have captured a Mogadorian? Or who at least *think* they've captured a Mogadorian?

I know at once that this is the first link that's passed through my monitor that's truly worthy of an "EHP" ranking. I click on the hyperlink and drag it over to the "Investigate" directory ... but then I stop.

Why would I alert the Mogadorians to the location of these humans? Humans the Mogs will undoubtedly capture and kill? I might get in trouble if I discard the link—surely there are failsafes built into the system for erroneous Discards—but why should I make it easier for these Mogadorian bastards? By discarding this link, I will save a human life ... or at least slow down the Mogadorian hunting machine for a few minutes.

It's worth it.

I don't care if I live or die. If One is gone and I'm stuck in this vile society, why should I fight to live? The pleasure of outperforming Serkova has faded; besides, with rankings like my current ones, that ship has sailed.

I click Discard.

They'll come for you.

In my bones, I know I'm going to reap hell for what I've done. And I don't care.

Fuck the Mogadorians.

I start dumping every link on my monitor into the Discard directory, as fast as I can. There's no upper limit on the number of links that can get routed to a single monitor—the more links you process, the more get routed your way—so before I know it I've chucked upwards of three hundred links into the Discard directory.

I'm making a spectacular mess of their system. The clock counts down to the end of the hour. How many unevaluated Discards can I cram into the

directory before my fellow surveyors catch on? For that matter, how long until my treasonous evidence-burying gets discovered?

I'm exhilarated.

The hourly rankings come in. I've discarded 611 links. Investigated 0. My provisional accuracy ranking is a hilarious 11 percent. Better yet, as if to make a mockery of their entire ranking algorithm, I come in first place.

"What the hell, Adamus!" Serkova snarls at me. The others turn around to face me, all the work in the surveyor facility grinding to a halt. No one knows how to react to my total breakdown. "Are you fricking nuts?"

I smile at Serkova, dizzy from my own outlandish behavior. "Yeah, I think I might be."

Then an alarm goes off.

I hear the heavy march of footsteps coming down the hall: soldiers dispatched from HQ.

"You deserve whatever you get," says Serkova, spitting at me.

I run.

I dodge out into the Northwest tunnel to see the soldiers coming, fronted by the General. They look *pissed*.

If I'm going out, I'm going out with a bang. I run *towards* the marching guards ... then pull to a stop in front of Zakos's lab.

"Hey Pops," I say, taunting the General. "Did I do something wrong?"

"You know what you've done," he sneers at me. He gestures to the guards to seize me.

I resist, swinging my arms wildly, shouting as loud as I can. The Mogadorians hardly know how to react to such an undignified resistance. I can feel my father cringing in embarrassment.

The guards manage to subdue me, but the ruckus has attracted Dr. Zakos's attention. He steps out into the hall, as the guards begin dragging me away, probably to feed me to some hungry piken.

For a moment I worry my plan has failed, but then I hear Zakos's voice, calling from down the hall.

"General! Wait!"

My father halts our progress to listen to what Zakos has to say.

"If I may be so bold ... I may be able to put your son's life to some use."

CHAPTER 11

I'm back in the chair.

Zakos has convinced my father to allow him to perform an accelerated mind transfer between me and One. The process will be so intense it will kill me, literally frying my brain. But Zakos has guaranteed the General that he will be able to download the contents of One's transferred memories from *my* brain after my death. "If your son has been such a disappointment in life, at least allow him to be of service in death."

Zakos assured the General that even if the intelligence he extracts from my brain is of little consequence, the results of the experiment will represent a tremendous leap forward for Mogadorian technology.

"You don't need to make a hard sell, Zakos," I said, still trapped in the guards' grip. I turned to my father, an impudent smile on my lips. "Isn't that right, Pops? He had you on board at 'Kill Adamus,' didn't he?"

The General didn't even look at me. He nodded at his guards, who released me, then turned to the doctor. "Have the results on my desk by tomorrow morning," he said.

I've been in the lab since.

Guards monitor the door, but I'm not bound or watched by anyone but Zakos. Where am I going to go? How can I possibly escape? As my little demonstration in the hallway proved, I'm no match against Mogadorian soldiers.

Neither my father nor my sister has seen fit to visit me in my final hours. But my mother ventured down to deliver me a last meal. She entered the lab a few hours ago, carrying a couple slices of fresh-baked bread wrapped in a napkin and a plastic container filled with soup. She hesitated for a moment, looking for a suitable place to lay the meal. Then, realizing there was no good place for it, she wordlessly put the bread and soup on a laboratory counter. Then she turned her back to me, her hand on the door.

"Is it true?" she asked.

"Is what true?" I asked, a bit spitefully. I wanted to make her spell it out.

"That you've betrayed the Mogadorian cause."

I guess my father figured we were past sugarcoating things and had told her everything.

“Yes,” I said.

Without another word, she left.

Moments later, as I held the still-warm bread in my hand, I realized that final home-cooked meal would be the last kind and motherly thing she would ever do for me.

I threw it in the trash.

Now Zakos is prepping me for the procedure. He’s filled a syringe with some kind of anesthetic, explaining that this time he will render me unconscious before the procedure begins, which should give him greater precision over the neurological mapping. Soon I will be put under, then I will join One in her memories, and then I will be dead.

Zakos opens One’s pod, to make a couple of adjustments before the procedure begins. I think of One and all the Greeters in their pods.

“Does it hurt?” I ask.

“Excuse me?” He’s absorbed in his preparations.

“What you did to all the Greeters, keeping them alive, raking their brains for intel all those years.”

“Oh, I never really thought about it,” he says. “Yes, I would guess it’s quite excruciating.”

Just then I hear her voice. “You’re not *really* going to let him get away with that, are you?” I turn to see One, flickering beside my chair. I had wondered if I would get to see her again before going under, if she hadn’t already flickered out of existence.

I don’t really have a choice, I say. I’m trapped here.

She leans against the counter. “You always have a choice. You had a choice to screw up today on the job, to bait your father into sentencing you to death, to do it in Zakos’s earshot so you’d end up here....”

I was afraid you were already gone. I couldn’t think of anything else. I ran out of hope, figured I was going to lose you anyway, and we could at least—

“See each other one last time?” she says, finishing my thought. She gives me a flirty, cockeyed grin.

“That’s sweet,” she says. “But that wasn’t the real reason you went haywire today.”

She's right. That isn't how all this started. In the moment, I just couldn't bring myself to rat out those humans to my people. That was the first time the work I was doing as a surveyor was clearly going to help the Mogs and hurt others, and I couldn't do it. Over the past week I've had to take some crazy, on-the-fly risks, but that was the first time I acted completely without a plan, without any clear sense of what the consequences would be.

One, I say. I don't even really understand why I did what I did.

She doesn't answer me immediately, but instead turns back to the tiled wall, crossing her arms. I can see an idea brewing in her head. After a moment, she turns back to me and fixes me with a cryptic stare.

"Don't worry, Adam," she says. "You will. Seeing as you're going out anyway," she says, leaning close to my ear. "Don't you want to go out swinging?"

I look at her, confused.

"A giant leap for Mogadorian technology," she whispers, casting a glance over at the tiles where the Greeters' bodies are kept. "Is that what you really want your legacy to be?"

It's time.

I'm in the chair, connected to Zakos's console by a bunch of wires and cables. The machine that will plug me back into One's consciousness is already humming. "The parameters are in place," Zakos says. "It will just take a moment after we administer the anesthetic to begin working." He gestures to a syringe on a tray of tools next to me. The syringe hasn't escaped my attention either, though.

He approaches, towering above me in my reclined seat. As he holds my left hand against the arm of the chair and begins to pull the strap over my wrist, I know I only have a second to act.

I jerk my hand loose from Zakos's grip and leap up, grabbing the syringe and stabbing it into Zakos's throat before he can make another move. He punches me desperately, making contact with my face, but it's too late: I've already depressed the plunger.

He staggers back in a woozy daze, the drugs already making their way into his system, and falls to the floor.

I rip the strap off my left hand and stand up.

“Why ...” he says, puzzled at what I’ve done. “What could you possibly hope to accomplish ...”

Then he’s out.

I rush to the lab’s door and, as quietly as possible, lock it from the inside. I’m lucky that Dr. Zakos didn’t knock anything over on his way to the ground: any noise would’ve attracted the attention of the guards on the other side of the door. But I know that once I do what I’m about to, alarms will sound, getting their attention. It won’t take them long to override the lock.

But that’s okay. I only need a little time.

I run to the steel panel controlling the containment pods. There are no buttons, no instructions. I have no idea how to imitate Doctor Zakos’s complex gestures.

“Let me,” I hear. One’s voice.

She takes over my movements, just as she did when she hijacked my body in the jungle. I’m a spectator to my own body, watching as my hand dances elegantly across the surface of the panel.

An alarm goes off. I feel One vacating my body, ceding control back to me.

I get back in the chair, reattach a couple of electrodes and grip the arms of the seat.

I turn for one last look at the wall behind me, as all of the containment pods open noisily at once, a hydraulic chorus, disgorging their captive corpses. All except One’s pod, which is still linked to me through the mainframe.

Exposed to open air, the corpses will be rendered useless to further Mogadorian experimentation within minutes.

It’s hardly an elegant sabotage. But it will keep the Mogadorians from getting any intel from the dead Greeters, and should set Zakos’s research back a few years.

The machine connecting me to One begins to thrum louder. I used up all the anesthetic to knock Zakos out, so I expect this will hurt. But I know that One has a plan for me, and it doesn’t involve dying.

That’s when I see Malcolm Goode, waking up on his slab.

“One?” I ask, nervously.

In the heat of the moment, I hadn't even considered what would happen to Malcolm, the sole surviving Greeter. I watch as he pulls himself loose from his connecting cables and steps off his slab. His legs, unused for years, instantly give out on him.

He locks eyes with me. He's almost three times my age, but he looks as lost and confused as a child.

One's voice in my ear: "Don't worry about him. He's going to be fine."

That's when the pain hits.

I'm plunged back into the moment of Hilde's death, the blast of the Mogadorian's gun opening up her chest right in front of my eyes. Hilde falls to her knees before me.

Red, orange, and purple swarms my vision. Everything's faster, louder than before, pulsing and buzzing. One's thoughts are screaming in my head again: *No, she can't, they couldn't. It's my fault, I failed. How could I? They will pay, we'll make them pay.* I feel it again, that ripping sensation inside me. *Oh right, that's right, that's how, so simple.* The floors start to shake, a massive rumble coming from beneath my feet but also coming from inside me and as my heart sings *yes, they will pay, they WILL pay*, the walls of the shack begin to shake and I stomp my foot. A wave of energy shoots through the floor. It's a power greater than any I've ever wielded, and it's coursing through us and rippling outwards.

Through the orangey blur of my vision I see the walls of the shack explode, I see four Mogadorian warriors flung out of sight by the force that's come from within me.

As the dust settles, I look down at my hands, at my legs. I expect to see One's body as the source of this power.

But I don't see One's body. I see only my own.

"That's it," I hear. One's voice.

I turn around, surprised to discover I am no longer in the Malaysian shack. I am on that beautiful California beach. Our place.

One sits on the sand, waiting for me. "Pretty cool, huh?"

I nod, flabbergasted at the sheer power of One's Legacy. I'm dizzy from wielding it.

"Come sit with me. We don't have much time."

I collapse beside her, still breathless.

It's perfect: the sun is warm on my skin, the sand cool on my feet. And best of all, One's here, right by my side.

Across the sea, there's a roiling storm, the clouds as black as ink. But we're still in the sun.

One touches me.

In this place, I can feel it. I reach out and touch her too. We're shoulder to shoulder, staring forward at the approaching storm.

"We got what we came for," she says. "It's time for me to go."

I turn to her. *What is she saying?*

She bites her lip, looking at me apologetically. "You realize this was never about saving my life, right?"

My heart sinks into my stomach, but I don't know why.

"Of course it was," I say. "You think I came back and faced my family, went through all that for no reason? I was trying to save you."

"There was never any way to save me. A part of you knew that."

"I don't understand."

"We needed to help the Garde." She looks away from me, like this is as hard for her to say as it is for me to hear. "But after your defeat at Ivan's hands, you felt you had nothing to offer the cause. You said you were too weak, too skinny, that you weren't the hero I am. That you didn't have any power."

"But now you do."

Her Legacy. She's... *given* it to me? I get to keep it?

"I'm sorry for tricking you, Adam. But you needed to get to this point. If you hadn't come back here, a part of you still would've been attached to your family, to your people. You've seen how little they value you, how little they value anything but bloodshed and war. Now you're ready to walk with the Garde, to truly fight against your own people."

No. I pull away, my mind reeling.

"Please Adam. Use my Legacy well."

Across the sea, shadows dance and crackle and writhe in the clouds. Out there I can see her moving in slow-motion combat. Her last seconds, playing out in front of us.

"One," I plead. "Please stop."

“This is how it has to be. Deep down you knew it all along, Adam. I’m not real. I was *never* real.” She turns to the roiling storm, to the tragic movie of her death playing in the clouds. The blade of some faceless Mogadorian’s sword penetrates her through her back, erupting from her stomach. The killing blow.

“Deep down you knew. I’ve been dead this whole time.”

I look at One. She’s my best friend. She’s everything to me.

She turns from the scene of her death to look at me. “You created me, made me out of my memories, so you wouldn’t have to walk this path alone.”

“That’s not possible. You’re all I have.”

She smiles. “No. You have *you*. The courage it took to turn against your people, the courage it took to come back here, to risk your life to get the power you’d need to walk a hero’s path … that was always *all you*.”

One has never spoken so highly of me. I should be flattered, but all I am is scared. I’m going to lose her.

“I can’t be alone.” I feel pathetic, exposing my fears and weakness so totally to One. But I’m desperate. I’ve lost too much already to lose her too.

“Adam, the alone part is over. I promise you.”

“One,” I say, my eyes filling with tears. “I love you.”

She nods, smiling, then reaches forward to touch my cheek. She’s crying now too. “If I’d lived, I think …” she says, “I think you really would have.”

She kisses me and says good-bye.

And then she’s gone forever.

CHAPTER 12

There's a shape in the dark, moving around me.

I see the sky. Stars above.

The shape is moving my limbs. Resting my head on a soft mound of earth. Pouring water over my wounds. Forcing me to drink.

The shape's skin is as white as the moon.

"Malcolm," I say.

"Yes," he says. He laughs, crouching beside me. "I'm Malcolm. I remember that now."

I sit up, half expecting to find myself still trapped in the lab, despite the sky. Despite the stars. But we're in the wilderness, in a field at the edge of a forest.

"I carried you as far as I could. Then I needed to rest." He sighs, taking a sip of water. "But we have to keep moving soon."

I'm baffled, utterly confused. *How did we escape?*

Malcolm senses my confusion. "I woke up in the lab. Mogadorians were at the doors, trying to break in. That doctor was on the floor. And you ... you were convulsing. And then, just as the Mogadorians came through the door, there was ..."

He trails off, laughing with amazement. "There was an earthquake."

As soon as I regain my strength, we begin to make our way on foot through forests, pastures, and farmland, traveling mostly at night to escape detection. We're headed west, trying to put as much space between us and what remains of Ashwood Estates as we can.

Outside of Ashwood, with only the sky to measure time, days and nights pass without comment. I lose track of the hour, the day of the week, how long we've been on the road. *Ten days? Twelve days?* I cease to measure time in numbers, counting instead the shifting landscapes, the changing scenery.

Malcolm eventually explains that the earthquake seriously damaged the underground facilities. He says it was a miracle he was able to get us both out through the collapsing structure without being apprehended. He says it was as if the entire structure was collapsing around us, but never *on* us—almost like it was creating an escape for us with every step he took. He figures the Mogs have their hands full rebuilding, that there's a good chance they haven't yet realized we even survived the devastation.

But he thinks we need to keep moving to be safe.

I agree.

We've camped out for the day in an unused shed at the edge of a tobacco farm. My limbs are tired from our constant trekking, but my cuts and scrapes are starting to heal.

Malcolm sees me mopping down the worst of my remaining cuts. "It's a miracle you weren't hurt worse." He shakes his head in wonderment. "It's a miracle we weren't both killed. And it's an even bigger miracle the earthquake happened in the first place. If not, there would've been no escape."

Now's as good a time as any to tell him.

"It was no miracle."

He stops what he's doing, looks at me curiously.

I haven't used One's Legacy on my own since the day I used it to destroy the Mogadorian lab. But I know the ability is still inside me. I can feel it there, nestled, pulsing, waiting for me to pick it up. To play.

I close my eyes and concentrate. The ground beneath us heaves and ripples, the walls of the shed quake. A few rusted tools, hung by hooks, clatter off the wall to the ground.

It's nothing major, barely a tremor: I only wanted to test myself, and to show Malcolm my gift.

Malcolm's stunned, eyes bulging. "That was amazing."

"It's a Legacy. A gift from the Loric."

Malcolm looks at me with one of his befuddled expressions.

"Do you know about the Loric?" I ask. I still don't really know what Malcolm remembers, how much is left of his brain.

"I know a little," he says. "My memory, it has ... patches." He sighs heavily, clearly frustrated. "I've been working on it. Trying to remember everything. But mostly I remember the darkness."

“The darkness?” I ask, but as soon as the words are out of my mouth I realize what he means. The darkness of the containment pod. All those years in an induced coma, hooked up to machines, having his brain dredged for information. I shudder.

“When I try to summon a memory, it’s like I have to go back into the darkness to find it. I have to go back through years of nothing to remember any one thing.” He laughs, with a note of bitterness I’ve never heard in his voice before. “But there *are* a few things I remember that I don’t have to fight to recall. Important things.”

Malcolm goes quiet, lost in thought. Before I can press him to explain, he changes the subject.

“You said you were given a Loric’s power.” He leans forward. “So you’re not a Loric?”

I grin. “You thought I was Loric?”

He nods. “Yeah. That or a high-priority human captive like me.”

“No,” I say, a bit nervously. “I’m not human. And I’m not Loric.” I’ve been dreading telling him the truth. How will he react if he knows I belong to the same breed that held him in captivity and tortured him for years? But I knew I’d have to come clean eventually. I figure now’s as good a time as any.

“I’m a Mogadorian.”

That befuddled look again. “If I’d known that,” he says, “I probably would’ve left you in the lab.”

Uh-oh.

But then he begins to laugh..

Before I know it, I’m laughing too, and starting to tell him my story.

Malcolm and I develop a routine, sleeping by day and walking by night. We graze farmland and forests and roadside Dumpsters for sustenance. We cross hills, streams, and highways. We spend weeks—months?—like this. I begin to lose track of time.

When we’re in remote fields, far from roads and houses, we train. Malcolm has no experience with Legacies, but then neither do I. Brute force with my newfound power is no problem: I was able to nearly decimate

Ashwood Estates—quite literally—in my sleep. But my precision and control need work. So we focus on that.

In today's training session Malcolm takes a position on the other side of a field. I stand, getting ready to wield my power. When we're both ready, we signal each other with our arms. Training time.

I stare across the field at Malcolm, mentally mapping the distance between us. Malcolm has set pebbles on top of the fence posts running the distance between us; for every pebble I knock off its post, he will deduct a few points. It's easy to send out my seismic force in an indiscriminate wave, knocking everything in its path, but he wants me to hit the area right beneath him, and *only* that area. He says this practice will increase my precision.

I focus hard on where he is, until everything else disappears. Then I unleash my power.

There are days when I can't even reach Malcolm, when the farthest I can send my power is ten yards in front of me. There are other days when distance comes too easy, and I wildly overshoot, felling trees fifty yards past Malcolm's position. Sometimes I hit him with pinpoint accuracy, and the ground trembles delicately below him. When this happens he calls out, telling me to sustain that gentle force. But sometimes the intensity of my seismic power slips outside of my control, and the ground will erupt beneath him, sending him ten feet in the air.

He's always patient, gracious, and kind about my misfires. Which only makes me happier when I manage a perfect score at this game we've created, rumbling the earth immediately beneath his feet without sending him flying. It takes extraordinary control, and so much mental effort I usually wind up with a minor migraine, but it's worth it to see his proud face.

My parents disowned me. I don't think my father ever loved me. I was never going to have the kind of unconditional love from a parent I saw on television or read about in human literature.

During the three years I spent in One's mind, I saw her close relationship with Hilde, and I was jealous. They fought all the time, but on some deep level they trusted and loved each other. Hilde trained and cultivated One's talents, encouraged her when she succeeded. Ever since I witnessed that, I've craved something like it. A mentor. And now I have one.

One promised me I wouldn't be alone. She was right.

Our route through the country becomes a zigzagging path, designed to escape Mogadorian detection. It's so roundabout that I never even consider we're heading somewhere specific, that Malcolm has a destination in mind.

I enjoy the aimlessness. I feel safer off the grid, like I did back at the aid camp. But I know that eventually we're going to need a plan, some way to reconnect with the scattered Garde. I may cringe at bloodshed, and I may fear that they will reject me for being a Mogadorian, but I can't help being excited by the prospect of meeting my new allies.

After a long night's trek, we camp out in a small grove at the edge of the woods in rural Ohio. Malcolm devotes so much time and energy to training me that I've been repaying the favor, usually as we're settling down for a day's sleep.

I train *him*. I ask him questions about his past, trying to jog his memory. I know his patchy memory is frustrating, but he will never recover his memories unless he works at it. So I grill him, pressing him for details.

"What happened before the darkness?" I ask tonight.

He's clearing some brush on the ground, making a smooth surface to sleep on. "I hate this."

"I know," I say. We're both exhausted and mental training is the last thing either of us wants to do right now.

But I keep going. "What happened before the darkness?"

"I'm tired," he says, stretching out on the dirt. "And I can't really remember."

"Come on. One thing," I say. "Just tell me one thing you remember from before the Mogs took you."

He's quiet.

"Malcolm. You already told me there's one important thing you remember from before, one thing you didn't even have to try to remember." I figure I can at least get that out of him. "Just tell me that."

He turns to me, suddenly serious. "My son. I remember my son."

Whoa. I had no idea he had a son.

"The details of how I made contact with the Loric, how I was captured by the Mogs ... those things are starting to come back to me, though they're

still fuzzy. But I remember *everything* about my life back in Paradise.” He smiles. “I remember everything about Sam.”

“Don’t you want to see him?” I ask.

“Of course I do. That’s why I’ve been leading us back towards my old hometown.” He looks at me, clearly concerned about how I will react.

I’m stunned. “That’s where he is?”

“Well, I can’t be sure he’s still there, but it’s my only guess. It’s only a day or two days’ trek from here.”

I’m confused. I thought we were just running from the Mogadorians, but this whole time Malcolm’s been leading us to his home. “But our path, it’s been so random.”

“I’m still trying to keep the Mogadorians off our tail. That we continue to evade detection is even more important, the closer we get to Sam.” He sits up, giving me a solemn look. “You don’t have to come into town with me. It could be dangerous. For all I know the Mogadorians are waiting for me there.”

Malcolm looks at me, waiting to see how I’ll react. Under his gaze, I feel it: that familiar twinge of fear in my gut. My typical reluctance to enter the fray.

But there’s something different about me now. I have One’s Legacy—my Legacy. I don’t feel as powerless as I used to.

If anything, I feel a strange itch to see what I can do with my new ability. Months ago, One tried to rouse me back to the Loric cause and I balked. It took her creating an epically complex psychological trick to get me to leave the aid camp.

But I don’t need much persuading from Malcolm.

“Let’s go,” I say.

Paradise, Ohio, is a classic small town. A harmonious blend of farmland and suburbia, a far cry from the tacky faux-luxe of Ashwood’s McMansions. Walking with Malcolm along the road leading through the town, sticking to the other side of the tree line to stay out of view, I take a deep breath.

Yeah. I like it here.

Just as Paradise's main drag comes into view down the road, Malcolm starts leading us away, deeper into the woods. We walk for a mile through the trees. We pass houses out here in the woods—some prosperous-looking farmhouses, some busted-down-looking shacks. We avoid all of them, beelining through the woods to avoid being seen by anyone.

"What's he like?" I ask. As we've been traveling, I've told Malcolm almost everything there is to know about me—about how the son of a respected Mogadorian leader came to be the traitor that I am now. But there's so much about Malcolm that's still a mystery to me. Sometimes I wonder if it's because he doesn't like to think about it himself.

Still walking and staring straight ahead, Malcolm smiles sadly. "I don't know," he says.

"You mean you can't remember?"

"No, not that. My memories of Sam haven't faded at all. It's just—" He stops. "I can't say what he's like now, not when I haven't seen him in all this time. I've missed everything. He was just a kid when I got taken. He was smart, and he was kind. A great kid." He laughs. "He was Sam."

"What happens when we find him?" I ask.

Malcolm's expression darkens.

"I just need to see him. To know he's okay. You and I, we're marked for death by the Mogadorians. I know I can't exactly be a father to him under those conditions, but I need to see him at least once. After that ..." he says, his voice trailing off.

I finish his thought. "After that we go back on the run."

Malcolm nods. "It won't be safe for us to stick around."

I feel a strange twinge of relief at that thought.

"We're close," he says, quickening his stride.

I see a house up ahead, through the trees.

"That's it," he says.

As we walk, the texture of the dirt beneath our feet begins to shift. I look down: it's burned. Scarred. My antennae go up, preparing for a possible attack.

The closer we get, the worse it is. More scorched earth, more fallen trees. There's been a battle here.

"Malcolm," I say. "The Mogadorians have been here."

But of course he's already noticed. He's speeding up, racing towards the house. I keep pace behind him, worried what we're running into.

But when he runs up to the house's side door and bangs on it, and a shocked-looking woman steps outside, eyes bulging at Malcolm, I stop running. Malcolm's given me no instruction; I have no idea what's going on.

I hang back.

Malcolm holds the woman by the shoulders, talking to her, asking her questions. The woman's expression of shock and wonderment begins to melt, giving way to something else.

Anger.

She slaps him. Then slaps him again. Soon she's unleashed a barrage, and Malcolm just stands there, absorbing each and every blow. I can't hear her from where I stand, but I know what she's saying. "Where were you? Where were you? Where were you?"

She falls to her knees on the porch and begins to sob. Moments later, Malcolm joins her.

I wait. Malcolm has been inside with the woman for an hour now. We exchanged a look before he headed inside with her. I nodded, giving him the sign that I'd be fine out here on my own.

Kicking the scorched dirt, I'm anxious, keyed up. To judge by the tracks, by the burned patches of earth, there was some kind of conflict here not long ago. Mogadorians could be close.

I have One's Legacy now, I remind myself. Even if I come face-to-face with a Mog force, I'm not powerless anymore. I can fight back.

The more time passes, the more I worry about Malcolm. To come all this way and discover that something has happened to his son would be devastating.

Malcolm finally emerges from the house. He walks with a hard-nosed determination, strutting right past me and back into the woods.

All he says is "Come."

I follow him across the backyard to a large stone well.

"It's open," he says, shaking his head.

"So?" I ask. "Malcolm, you have to tell me what's going on."

Without answering, Malcolm climbs into the well and disappears.

Again, I follow.

I make my way down a long, narrow ladder and finally arrive at the bottom of the well.

“Malcolm?” I ask. No response. I feel my way along the walls down a narrow passageway, which slowly gives way into a room.

A large halogen lamp lights up, illuminating the space. Malcolm holds it, and swings it around the room.

I follow the arc of the beam. Bare walls, some computer equipment in the corner. A shelf with supplies: water bottles, canned food—

Startled by what I see, I gasp. Against the wall, close enough for me to touch, is a massive skeleton.

The skeleton’s head is tipped downwards in an angle of dignified, almost lordly resignation. But it’s still a skull, with deep hollow sockets pointing right at me. I yelp, backing against the opposite wall.

“The Mogadorians didn’t find this place,” says Malcolm. “If they had, they wouldn’t have left it like this. They would have destroyed this skeleton, or taken it. But the well was open. Someone’s been here.” Malcolm resumes poking around in the chamber. “The tablet’s gone. He must have come here, and then after ...”

“Malcolm,” I whisper, hoping he will calm down and explain himself. “I’m in the dark here,” I say. “Quite literally.”

He ignores my joke.

“My wife saw Sam with some other kids; she said there was a battle. By what she described, those other kids had to be members of the Garde. Sam was with them, fighting by their side.”

I experience a brief chill of excitement at the thought that the Garde was here only a short time ago. The Garde. My people. My *new* people.

“In my absence, I guess he took up my cause, and wound up in battle with Mogs and ... now he’s gone.”

Malcolm stares at me, a haunted look on his face.

“My son Sam is gone.”

Malcolm’s wife won’t let him in the house again. She’s too angry.

As a result, we've camped out in his underground bunker, stretching out on the bare stone floor. I've slept in some pretty rough quarters since going on the run with Malcolm, but I've never faced a challenge quite like trying to fall sleep under the hollow nose of an eight-foot-tall skeleton.

Malcolm explains that she is crushed by grief for her missing son. That as angry as she is with Malcolm for disappearing, the worst part is him finally reappearing only weeks after Sam disappeared—too late to save him.

She blames Malcolm for whatever's happened to Sam. And Malcolm says she's *right* to blame him.

"It was my fault. I was so excited to make contact with the Loric, I didn't even consider the consequences. Once I saw what the Mogadorians were capable of, I realized my role as a Greeter might be a danger to my family, but it was too late. Before I could do anything to protect them, I was taken."

Malcolm theorizes that, haunted by his disappearance, Sam began to unravel some of the mysteries of the Mogadorian invasion. That he somehow forged an alliance with members of the Garde.

And that at some point in the past few weeks, in battle near his house, he was captured by the Mogs, and either killed or detained.

When Malcolm says this, my mind races back to the memo I encountered while snooping around the underground server in the Media Surveillance facility. The memo was already a year old when it declared all future detainees and captives were to be routed to the Dulce base in New Mexico. If Sam was captured weeks ago, there's a good chance he's being kept there.

I stare at Malcolm, stretched out on the floor, his back to me.

"Malcolm," I say.

He rolls over and turns to me. I can see from his gaze that he's lost in doubt and guilt and grief. Clearly the search for his son is what's been driving him since we escaped from Ashwood.

"I think I know where your son is."

CHAPTER 13

I stand back as Malcolm opens the garage door. Inside, covered in dust, is an old Chevy Rambler. “I can’t believe it’s still here,” he says, diving towards the passenger door.

We are at a storage facility on the outskirts of Paradise. Malcolm explains that he paid for this garage space many years in advance, keeping the car fueled up and ready should he ever need to skip town on short notice. In fact, he was headed for this garage when he was abducted by the Mogadorians years ago.

I’m impressed with his recall. “Your memory’s improving.”

“Yeah,” he says, smiling slyly. “It seems to be. Must be all of your annoying quizzes.” I laugh as he turns to the car’s glove compartment, pulling something out. He holds it out of the car door for me to see.

A spare pair of prescription glasses.

“Jackpot,” he says, triumphantly. He wipes the lenses with the tail of his shirt and slips them onto his head.

He sits back in the passenger seat, looking at me through the windshield.

“I can’t tell you how amazing it feels to be able to see clearly. It’s been so long,” he says.

He lets out a contented sigh. “Amazing.”

“I didn’t even know you needed glasses.”

“Big-time,” he says. “This is actually the first time I’ve seen your face as anything but a big smudge.” He squints up at me. “I can definitely see the Mogadorian thing, now. Yeah, definitely something evil about your face.”

I laugh, giving him the finger. Teasing me for being a Mogadorian has become a running joke between us. Joking about it is really just a testament to how accepting of me Malcolm has been.

“Full tank?” I ask.

He leans over, starts the engine, peering owlishly as the gas gauge whirs up.

“Very nearly.”

He slides behind the wheel as I get into the passenger seat. We're traveling light. Heading to New Mexico.

"You ready for this?" he asks.

"Not at all," I reply.

"Yeah," he says. "Me neither."

And we're off.

If we weren't traveling incognito, trying to avoid detection by taking side roads, we could've made the trip to the base in three days. As it is, the trip takes almost a week.

I don't mind the extra time.

Sitting beside Malcolm in the passenger seat, it occurs to me that we may be driving towards our own ends. That just as I had to say good-bye to One, I may have to say good-bye to Malcolm. Right when I thought I'd found a father figure, I now find myself embarking on what could be a suicide mission with him. I can't be Malcolm's son. He already has a son, and—for better or worse—I have a father. But I can help save Sam.

I remember what One said to me, that she'd pegged me for a hero, wanted me to try for "great" things.

Well, it turns out a hero's lot is not glory or reward, but sacrifice. I'm still not sure I'm ready for that. I'd be happy if this car trip lasted forever. But soon enough we'll cross the border into New Mexico and be only hours away from the base.

A big part of me doesn't want to go find Sam. If I can't have a normal life, I want to stay with Malcolm, living on the edges of society and evading the Mogs.

But I know that's not possible.

I know what we're doing is what must be done.

We're at the fenced edge of the Dulce base. We parked out in the desert at dusk and crossed the still hot sands to the electrified perimeter fence, which is a quarter mile or so from the compound itself. Malcolm explained that he knew how to find the base from his alien-conspiracy days, long before he'd known anything about Mogadorians or Loric, when his awareness of extraterrestrials was limited to conspiracy newsletters and countless

viewings of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. The Dulce base was a lightning rod for crazed speculation about governmental cover-ups of alien life. The irony, he said, is that all that speculation must have predated any actual human contact with the real extraterrestrials by several years. Until recently, it probably *was* just a military base. “Guess me and my wacko friends were ahead of our time,” he joked.

We crouch low to the ground, figuring there are surveillance cameras surrounding the fence. We’ve approached at the rear edge of the compound, far away from the base’s entrance. Malcolm thinks security might be a little more diffuse at this end of the base.

For all of Malcolm’s knowledge from old newsletters, not to mention the tiny bit of preparatory research we did at an internet café en route, there’s only so much you can find out about a secret government base through public channels. We’re mostly going in blind.

Malcolm pulls out a crappy pair of binoculars we bought at a truck stop and scans the facility.

After a moment he taps me, pointing out a watchtower a few hundred yards down the fence. Squinting through the evening’s half-light, I can see a generator a few paces off from the watchtower. We can only hope that generator powers the fence. If I can hit it with my Legacy, it’s our one chance of getting inside.

“Tower’s got to be three hundred yards … no, four hundred yards away.”

“Yeah,” I say. I start pounding my fist into my hand, a little pre-Legacy ritual I picked up. It doesn’t make any sense that warming up my hands would help with my accuracy—the power comes from deep inside me, from my core, not from my hands—but it’s become habit by now.

“That’s like three regulation football fields, Adam. We never trained for that.”

“I got it,” I say, confidently.

I don’t actually feel confident, but figure acting confident can only help my odds.

I reach deep into myself, eyes focused tight on the area encompassing the watchtower and generator.

The trick, I’ve discovered, is anger. And it has to be my own. The first few weeks I was able to channel One’s rage at losing Hilde to access my Legacy, but its efficacy quickly waned. I needed to find my own rage.

So now I think of Kelly, too ashamed of me to even speak to me. I think of my mother, leaving me to rot in the Mog lab. I think of Ivanick, his hands at my back, pushing me down the ravine. Mostly, I think of my father: delivering the killing blow to Hannu. Sentencing me to death. And a million other, smaller injustices, perpetrated over my entire life.

I hate them. I hate everything they stand for.

And then I feel it, my power, my rage, coursing below the ground, in search of the watchtower. Like a giant stone hand, its fingers curl upward, fondling the earth, feeling.

There it is.

I let it rip.

The ground beneath me and Malcolm remains still, but I can see the watchtower rumble, erupting with tremendous force. The generator, sundered from the ground, shoots sparks. Then the tower collapses.

Malcolm turns to me, shocked, amazed. Proud.

He smiles. "Touchdown," he says.

CHAPTER 14

We creep over the fence, no longer electrified. We know that the generator's explosion and the collapse of the watchtower must've attracted the attention of the base's perimeter guards, and in fact we're banking on that to be able to run aboveground without interference. If they're too distracted by the explosion to maintain sufficient ground cover along our path, we've got a shot.

Our optimism pays off. We make it close to the compound without anyone seeing us. Most of the guards have been drawn to the watchtower; if they're even aware of a breach in their perimeter, they probably think it's all the way over there.

Then I stop. On the other side of the sprawling compound, over the horizon, there is chaos. Noise. Explosions. Smoke. Weaponry firing.

I turn to Malcolm. "Weapons testing?" I ask.

Malcolm shakes his head.

Something is going down at the base. Something *big*.

I have a strange hunch. Something inside of me says the Garde is here.

"What do you think it is?" I ask Malcolm, wondering if he has the same feeling I do.

"I don't know. But I'm not looking a gift horse in the mouth. The base is massive. If some kind of battle is going down on the other side of it, that means they might be spreading their resources a bit thin on this end to compensate. We might be able to catch 'em off their game, even once we're inside."

He resumes his march to the rear of the compound. I follow.

We position ourselves behind a parked Humvee at a side entrance. We can still hear the distant sound of chaos, erupting half a mile away at the other side of the compound. We lie in wait as a young soldier flies out of the door, running towards the Humvee. I wonder if he's been dispatched to the other end of the base, like Malcolm guessed.

In a flash, Malcolm ambushes him.

I've never seen Malcolm in combat before. Clearly he's not trained for it, but he has two things going for him. First, the soldier was distracted, in a hurry. But even more important, Malcolm knows he's getting closer to his son, and his determination to save Sam lights him up. Malcolm swings wildly, an uncoordinated assault that nevertheless catches the young soldier off guard.

Malcolm manages to knock him out. We drag the unconscious soldier behind the Humvee. Malcolm rips an access card from his chest, then takes the soldier's gun for good measure.

"Just in case," he says, awkwardly wielding the gun. I can read the hesitation on his face: he doesn't want to kill anyone. I know he's relying on me to use my Legacy skillfully enough that he won't have to.

We creep to the side door. Malcolm swipes the card through the access panel. After a second, a green light flashes and the lock disengages. We take a deep breath and open the door.

It's worse than I'd imagined. A long corridor opens up before us, leading to a small alcove with a desk clerk. There are at least five soldiers in the area and six or seven other military personnel. And they've all turned in unison, seeing us at once.

One of the soldiers shouts. "They're coming from both sides!" They think we're part of the same invading force attacking from the front of the compound.

I have no time to consider that, and send a blast out in front of me, shredding the concrete floor of the hallway. And another one. And another one.

Soldiers and workers are knocked off balance or thrown against walls as we rush forward through the fresh rubble.

I know I'm causing pain and injury; I can only reason that at least I'm saving them from gunfire. More important, I'm keeping Malcolm safe.

We round the corner by the desk alcove, only to be confronted by three more soldiers. I let loose another seismic wave, sending them hard against the walls behind them, knocking the wind out of them, breaking bones.

I cringe inwardly at what I've done, even as I feel a creeping exhilaration at my own power. I didn't realize I was capable of such tremendous force.

Malcolm dives forward to the overturned desk, scrabbling through its scattered contents, all while struggling to keep his gun-wielding arm raised. I circle Malcolm. He searches for a compound map, or something to give us a clue as to where Sam is being held, while I keep an eye on the fallen soldiers, ready to blast anyone who manages to get to their feet.

“Got it,” he says, leafing through a large binder. “Compound directory.”

“Hurry,” I say, still scanning the fallen soldiers, my fists raised.

A soldier clammers to his feet, hugging the wall, out of breath. We lock eyes as his hand drifts to his gun.

I shake my head. No.

He looks at me, confused, helpless.

He’s seen what I can do. To my own shock and amazement, he puts one hand up and then tosses his weapon aside with the other.

“There’s a cell cluster in Wing E, this way,” says Malcolm, pointing in one direction. “But there’s another cell cluster at the other end of the compound.”

Malcolm tosses back and forth through the pages. He’s torn, unsure of which way to go. I can see him beginning to melt down, to lose his cool. The closer we get to Sam, the higher the stakes, the more likely it is that one false move could mess everything up.

“There are also interrogation rooms in Wing C. He could be there.” Malcolm clutches his forehead. “He could be anywhere.”

Watching Malcolm on the verge of a breakdown, I know what I have to do.

I leap at the soldier, grabbing him by the collar. He whimpers at my touch.

“We’re looking for a captive. Sam Goode. Where is he?”

The soldier bites his lip, closes his eyes. Surrender is one thing, but to give up information to an invading force is a step farther than he is willing to go.

“Tell me,” I say, with menacing calm. He keeps silent.

I will a seismic rumble, right beneath our feet.

He gasps.

“Tell me,” I say. I increase the rumble’s force as the concrete beneath us goes liquid, waving and rocking and cracking beneath our feet. I maintain an even intensity, but it’s a terrifying sensation, for me as well as for him.

“Tell me now or I’ll make this floor rise up, chew us up, and drag us straight to hell.”

He whimpers again, tears streaming down his cheeks.

I increase the intensity.

“Wing C!” he screams, giving up. “He’s in Wing C! He was kept away from the others. He’s the only prisoner being held in those cells.”

I release my grip, and the soldier falls to his knees, crying.

I know I’ve done a terrible thing, completely humiliating an adversary who had already surrendered. But there’s no time for guilt.

I turn to Malcolm. “Wing C,” I shout.

Relieved, he tosses the binder aside and races through a door to our right. After doing one last sweep of the fallen soldiers, I join him.

We enter another long hallway.

“Wait!” I yell.

I turn back to the door we’ve come through. The last thing we need is for any of those soldiers to follow and assault us again. So I target the doorway with my Legacy, and knock out the stone structure. The doorway collapses in a noisy heap of rubble.

That should keep them.

We race down the passage for what feels like a mile. The tunnel gets narrower and narrower, darker and darker, the farther we get.

We finally arrive at a locked door. Either the soldier whose keycard we swiped didn’t have clearance for this area, or some kind of security override has kicked in in the wake of our assault.

“Stand back,” I say, an idea quickly forming.

I reach deep into the earth below the compound. I’ve never had to use this much precision with my legacy, and the amount of focus it requires is going to create an excruciating headache. I force the earth upwards, up against the door frame. The stone floor erupts and the steel door is blown from its hinges.

It’s not an ideal entrance—we have to climb up the rubble and then crawl through the half-blocked doorway—but it works.

We get up off our knees on the other side of the door.

We’re in the base’s armory, a warehouse-like space filled with shipping containers and crates. Judging by the warning signs emblazoned on the crates, they contain powerful explosives. I never would’ve used my power

in such close proximity to explosives if I had known what was on the other side of that door. We are lucky.

Malcolm grabs my arm, leading me forward through the armory. We come to another set of double doors. Malcolm tries the keycard: this time it works. “Lucky swipe,” he says. “That soldier must’ve had access through another route than the one we took.”

We step through the doors and enter a massive, multistoried prison-like structure, cold and oddly damp.

Now that we know there’s another way in, we’re certain that more soldiers will be coming soon. We have to hurry.

We race along the corridors, past rows and rows of empty cells, and start calling out Sam’s name at the top of our lungs.

I hear something, a rustle from above, off the second-story gangway.

I run ahead of Malcolm, up a stairwell, and along the gangway, running past cells.

I arrive at Sam’s cell. His hands grip the bars of his cage, eyes blinking against the light of the complex. He looks like he’s been through hell.

I’m speechless.

“Who are you?” he says, eyeing me suspiciously, backing into his cell.
“What do you want?”

He senses it. He knows I’m a Mogadorian.

“We’re here to help,” I start. But explanations aren’t necessary: Malcolm appears behind me and plunges his hands through the bars towards his son.

Sam stares at him, speechless. “Dad?” he says, incredulous.

“I’m here, Sam. I’m back.”

This reunion isn’t about me: it belongs to Sam and Malcolm.

I slowly back away from the cell. Alone again.

That’s when I hear it. Something Malcolm and Sam are too caught up to hear: the sound of marching soldiers.

Staring out over the gangway, I see soldiers pouring in from multiple shadowed doorways, from every corner of the complex.

Worse still, these are not human soldiers. They’re Mogs.

“Guys,” I say, shaking Malcolm’s shoulder. “We have company.”

I act without thinking, pulling Malcolm away from the bars and shouting to Sam, “Stand in the center of your cell and cover your head!”

Sam is confused, unsure of what I'm about to do, but he's smart enough to know we don't have time for explanations: he quickly assumes a huddle in the middle of his cell.

I reach my hands through the bars, sending feelers out to the other side of the cell's wall. I find the wall, the floor, then I sense the entire structure of the wall.

And then I blast.

The wall behind Sam crumbles, seismic shock ripping straight up its seams. But this whole structure is connected, and the impact sends aftershocks through the concrete floor beneath Sam. The floor of the cell juts out against the gangway, banging it so hard it almost buckles.

Sam tumbles forward and Malcolm and I are knocked hard against the gangway's railing.

The Mogadorians are getting closer.

I turn back to the cell, where the dust is beginning to settle. There's now an opening for Sam to get through the wall to the other side.

"Go!" I say. "Run!"

Sam picks himself off the floor, looks at me, then does as I tell him.

I look around. The floor beneath the cell has fissured, warping the cell bars enough that I think we can squeeze through them. I push Malcolm forward, but he struggles to get through the bars.

Mogadorians have completely swarmed the complex now—there must be at least thirty of them, with more coming, and they're already making their way up the stairs to the gangway we're standing on. We have thirty seconds, max.

Malcolm finally squeezes through into the cell, then turns to me.

"Hurry!" he pleads.

I look back at the approaching Mogadorian swarm. In the rear, in commander's attire, I see Ivanick. The only person in this world I fear as much as my father.

The General said he had been promoted, that he was working in the Southwest. And here he is.

My blood runs cold.

I step to the bars, about to squeeze through. Then I stop.

"What are you doing?" Malcolm begs. "Adam?"

I realize I'm not going through those bars. If Malcolm and Sam are going to have a shot of escaping the Mogadorians, one of us is going to have to hold them off. They won't stop chasing Malcolm and Sam unless someone *makes* them stop.

Besides, I don't want to run from my own people anymore. I want to kill them.

"Go," I say.

"What? Adam, no."

"Go with your son. Now."

I can see from Malcolm's eyes, from the dawning horror in his face as he realizes what I'm saying, how much he cares about me.

But I also know he has a greater responsibility to his son than he has to me. After one last moment's hesitation, he turns and disappears through the hole in the cell's wall.

I turn back to the approaching Mogs. They've slowed down, but their swords are raised. They're coming from both ends of the gangway, surrounding me.

I scan the complex. The stairways are full, the first floor is swarming with Mogs, and both routes down the gangway are blocked.

I have a choice: be captured, or go out swinging.

I aim my Legacy at the corner of the room behind one group of Mogadorians, and blast. The entire room shudders, and the gangway breaks free from the wall, knocking several Mogadorians to the ground below.

I grip onto the gangway as tight as I can. Whirling to the other side of the room, I blast again.

This time I almost flip over the gangway myself as the struts supporting it give out completely and it tips out towards the center of the room. There's no way back into the cell now. I'm flat against the railing, but still safe.

The floor below is teeming with Mogadorians. I look both ways down the gangway. Some Mog soldiers are merely struggling to stay on the precarious, creaking structure, but those with a firm grip are still coming, sliding along the railing towards me like acrobats. Getting closer.

I could blast the gangway again to hurt the Mogs still clinging to it, but that's not nearly enough to get me out of here safely.

My situation is so hopeless I almost laugh.

“Adamus,” I hear. I look down to the floor, to the massed Mogadorians, weapons all pointed at me. Among them stands Ivanick, staring up at me.

His expression is cold, mock-pitying. Nothing about his manner betrays any surprise at seeing me here, under these circumstances.

“Long time no see,” he says.

I know I’ve only bought Sam and Malcolm a minute’s lead on the Mog scum, but I hope it helps. I’m ready to deal with whatever comes my way next.

“You’ve got some power, Adam. It’s impressive. I’m sure Dr. Zakos or one of our other scientists would love to study you, to learn from your ability. Give up now and maybe we can work something out. You can be a test subject or something. I know how you like that.” It’s strange to see Ivanick promoted to a leadership role. He doesn’t really have the brains for it. But brains never counted for much among the Mogs.

“I mean,” he says, letting out a little laugh, “of course we’ll still have to kill you when we’re done.”

I cling to the bars. The Mogadorians are sliding closer, just waiting for the order to take me out.

“You suck at bargaining,” I say.

Ivan laughs. “Well, what else are you going to do? From what I can see, you’ve run out of options. It’s surrender-or-be-killed time.”

There’s no way I’m letting myself get captured.

Go out swinging.

I look to the wall perpendicular to the half-fallen gangway. The armory is behind it. I get an idea.

“That’s not exactly true, Ivan.”

I reach forward with my mind: one hundred yards, two hundred yards, three hundred yards. I stop.

There it is.

I see Ivan, staring up at me. His face has changed from mocking to suspiciously fearful. There’s no way he can know exactly what I’m about to do, but he knows me well enough to read my expression: I’m going to wipe us all out.

“That’s right,” I say. “The armory.”

“No way,” he says. “You wouldn’t. You’re Adamus. Son of the great General Andrakkus Sutekh. You can’t bring yourself to kill one of us, let

alone all of us."

I grin at him. *Watch me.*

I let rip another seismic pulse, aimed at the ground right below the armory.

Only a moment after the impulse leaves my body, my blast triggers a massive explosion.

There is a deafening boom, steel and concrete flying.

All around me I see Mogadorian bodies getting riddled with shrapnel.

The whole thing begins falling apart around me. The gangway collapses and I go flying, landing so hard on the ground that I'm almost knocked unconscious.

My ears ringing, my eyes half blinded by dust, I crane my neck to see tumbling concrete knocking out Mogadorian after Mogadorian. The whole cave is coming down around us.

On the ground by the fallen gangway I see Ivanick, his head nearly severed from his neck by the collapsed steel. Dead.

Mogadorians scream all around me.

To my own surprise, I *like* the sound.

Something heavy lands against my shoulder, slamming my head against the floor, pinning me in place. I can't move, and am too stunned to know if it was a minor wound or a fatal blow.

Why keep track now? I think. *There's more where that came from.*

Indeed there is: concrete keeps falling, all around me.

As the entire structure gives out and collapses onto us, I know I only have a few moments of consciousness left. But I'm not afraid.

I survived my fall down the ravine. I survived the implosion of Ashwood Estates. I wasn't even conscious then, and Malcolm said something kept us from being crushed, that it was as if some force kept us safe as the world fell down around us.

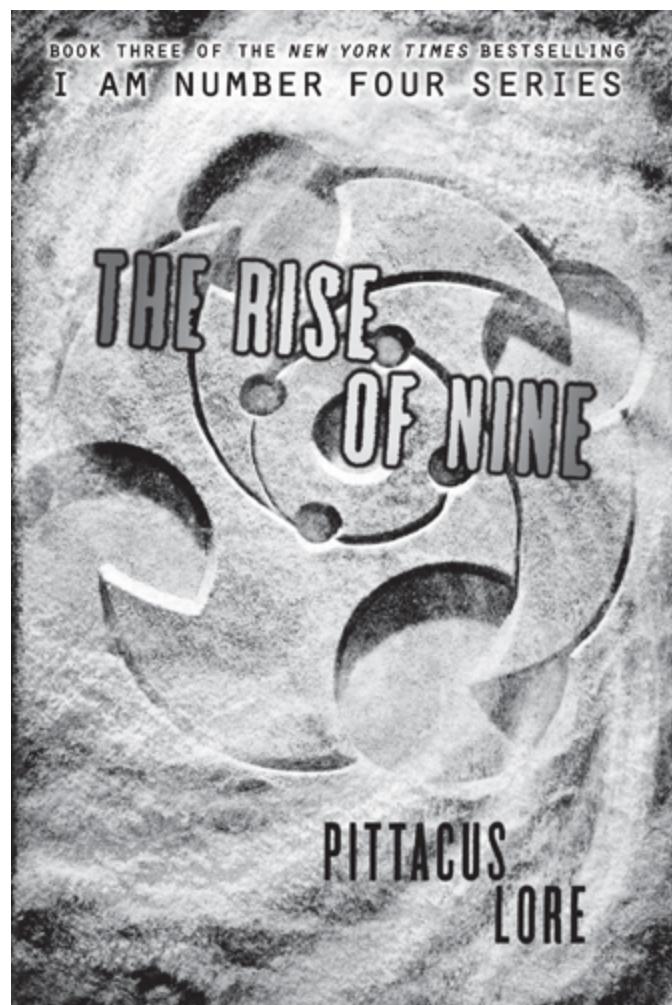
Third time's the charm.

It may just be exhaustion, it may just be delirium, but I'm overcome by a deep, sweet certainty that I was meant to survive. That my ultimate purpose lies somewhere beyond these tumbling walls, sometime beyond this frenzied moment. That the best of me is yet to come.

I will live.

EXCERPT FROM *THE RISE OF NINE*

THE LEGACIES CONTINUE IN



CHAPTER 1

6A. Seriously? I look at the boarding pass in my hand, its large type announcing my seat assignment, and wonder if Crayton chose this seat on purpose. It could be a coincidence. The way things have gone recently, I am not a big believer in coincidences. I wouldn't be surprised if Marina sat down behind me in row seven, and Ella made her way back to row ten. But, no, the two girls drop down beside me without saying a word, and join me in studying each person boarding the plane. Being hunted, you are constantly on guard. Who knows when the Mogadorians might appear?

Crayton will board last, after he's watched to see who else gets on the plane, and only once he feels the flight is absolutely secure.

I raise the shade and watch the ground crew hustle back and forth under the plane; the city of Barcelona is a faint outline in the distance.

Marina's knee bounces furiously up and down next to mine. The battle against an army of Mogadorians yesterday at the lake, the death of her Cépan and finding her Chest—and now, it's the first time in almost ten years that she's left the town where she spent her childhood. She's nervous.

"Everything okay?" I ask. My newly blond hair falls into my face and startles me. I forgot I dyed it this morning. It's just one of many changes in the last forty-eight hours.

"Everyone looks okay," Marina whispers, keeping her eyes on the crowded aisle. "We're safe, as far as I can tell."

"Good, but that's not what I meant." I gently set my foot on hers and she stops bouncing her knee. She offers me a quick apologetic smile before returning to her close watch of each boarding passenger. A few seconds later, her knee starts bouncing again.

I feel sorry for Marina. She was locked up in an isolated orphanage with a Cépan who refused to train her; she was stuck with a Cépan who had lost sight of why we are here on Earth in the first place. I'm doing my best to help her, to fill in the gaps. I can train her to control her strength and when to use her developing Legacies. But first I'm trying to show her that it's okay to trust me. Not only did she just lose her best friend, Héctor, back at

the lake, but, like me, she lost her Cêpan right in front of her. Both of us will carry that with us forever.

The Mogadorians will pay for what they've done. For taking so many who we've loved, here on Earth and on Lorien. It's my personal mission to destroy every last one of them, and I'll be sure Marina gets her revenge, too.

"How is it down there, Six?" Ella asks, leaning over Marina.

I turn back toward the window. The men below the plane begin to clear away their equipment, conducting a few last-minute checks. "So far, so good."

My seat is directly over the wing, which is comforting to me. On more than one occasion I've had to use my Legacies to help a pilot out of a jam. Once, over southern Mexico, I used my telekinesis to push the plane a dozen degrees to the right, only seconds before crashing into the side of a mountain. Last year I got 124 passengers safely through a vicious thunderstorm in Kansas by surrounding the plane with an impervious cloud of cool air. We shot, unharmed, through the storm like a bullet through a balloon.

When the ground crew moves on to the next plane, I follow Ella's gaze toward the front of the aisle. We're both impatient for Crayton to board. That will mean everything is okay, at least for now. Every seat is full but the one behind Ella. Where is he? I glance out at the wing again, scanning the area for anything out of the ordinary.

"Six?" Marina asks. I hear her buckle and unbuckle her seat belt nervously.

I lean down and shove my backpack under my seat. It's practically empty so it folds down easily. Crayton bought it for me at the airport. The three of us need to look like normal teenagers, he says, like high school students on a field trip. That's why there's an open biology textbook on my lap.

"Yeah?" I respond.

"You've flown before, right?"

Marina is only a year older than I am. But with her solemn, thoughtful eyes and her new, sophisticated haircut that falls just below her shoulders, she can easily pass for an adult. Right now, however, she bites her nails and pulls her knees up to her chest like a scared child.

“Yes,” I say. “It’s not so bad. In fact, once you relax, it’s kind of awesome.”

I’ve flown dozens of times, and everything has gone fine. However, this *is* the first time I’ve done it without using my invisibility Legacy to sneak on board. I know I’m much stronger now. And I’m getting stronger by the day. If a couple of Mog soldiers charged at me from the front of the plane, they wouldn’t be dealing with a meek young girl. I know what I’m capable of; I am a soldier now, a warrior. I am someone to fear, not hunt.

Marina lets go of her knees and sits up straight, releasing a long breath. In a barely audible voice, she says, “I’m scared. I just want to get in the air.”

“You’ll be fine,” I say in a low voice.

Finally, Crayton squeezes down the aisle, carrying a black briefcase. He’s wearing eyeglasses and a brown suit that looks too big for him. Under his strong chin is a blue bow tie. He’s supposed to be our teacher.

“Hello, girls,” he says, stopping next to us.

“Hi, Mr. Collins,” Ella responds.

“It’s a full flight,” Marina says. That’s code for everyone on board looks okay. To tell him everything on the ground appears normal, I say, “I’m going to try to sleep.”

He nods and takes his seat directly behind Ella. Leaning forward between Marina and Ella he says, “Use your time on the plane wisely, please. Study hard.”

That means, don’t let your guard down.

CHAPTER 2

I've been in and out of consciousness for the past two days, rolling back and forth in a hallucinating sickness. The effects from the blue force field outside the Mogadorians' mountain have lingered far longer than Nine told me they would, both mentally and physically. Every few minutes, my muscles seize and sear with pain.

I try to distract myself from the agony by looking around the tiny bedroom of this decaying, abandoned house. Nine couldn't have picked a more disgusting place for us to hide. I can't trust my eyes. I watch the pattern on the yellow wallpaper come to life, the design marching over patches of mold like ants. The cracked ceiling appears to breathe, rising and falling at frightening speeds. There's a large jagged hole in the wall that separates the bedroom and living room, as if someone tossed a sledgehammer through it. Smashed beer cans are strewn around the room, and the baseboards have been torn to shreds by animals. I've been hearing things rustling in the trees outside the house, but I'm too weak to be alarmed. Last night I woke to find a cockroach on my cheek. I barely had the energy to swat it off.

"Hey, Four?" I hear through the hole in the wall. "You awake or what? It's time for lunch and your food's getting cold."

I heave myself to my feet. My head spins as I stumble through the doorway into the living room, and I collapse on the dingy gray carpet. I know Nine's in here, but I can't keep my eyes open long enough to find him. All I want is to lay my head in Sarah's lap. Or in Six's. Either one. I can't think straight.

Something warm hits my shoulder. I roll over to see Nine sitting on the ceiling above me, his long black hair hanging down into the room. He's gnawing on something and his hands are greasy.

"Where are we again?" I ask. The sunlight coming through the windows is too much and I close my eyes. I need more sleep. I need something, anything, to clear my head and regain my strength. My fingers fumble over

my blue pendant, hoping to somehow gather energy through it, but it remains cold against my chest.

“The northern part of West Virginia,” Nine says between bites. “Ran out of gas, remember?”

“Barely,” I whisper. “Where’s Bernie Kosar?”

“Outside. That one is *always* on patrol. He is one cool animal. Tell me, Four, how did you of all the Garde end up with him?”

I crawl into the corner of the room and push my back up against a wall. “BK was with me on Lorien. His name was Hadley back then. I guess Henri thought it would be good to bring him along for the trip.”

Nine throws a tiny bone across the ceiling. “I had a couple of Chimæras as a kid, too. Don’t remember their names, but I can still see them running around our house tearing stuff up. They died in the war, protecting my family.” Nine is silent for a moment, clenching his jaw. This is the first time I’ve seen him act anything other than tough. It’s nice to see, even if it’s short lived. “At least, that’s what my Cêpan told me, anyway.”

I stare at my bare feet. I just noticed they’re black with grime. “What was your Cêpan’s name?”

“Sandor,” he says, standing up on the ceiling. He’s wearing my shoes. “It’s weird. I literally can’t remember the last time I said his name out loud. Some days, I can barely picture his face.” Nine’s voice hardens, and he closes his eyes. “But that’s how it goes, I guess. Whatever. They’re the expendable ones.”

His last sentence sends shock waves through me. “Henri was not expendable, and neither was Sandor! No Loric was ever expendable. And give me back my shoes!”

Nine kicks my shoes into the middle of the floor, then takes his time walking first along the ceiling and then down the back wall. “All right, all right. I know he wasn’t expendable, man. Sometimes, it’s just easier to think of him that way, you know? Truth is, Sandor was an amazing Cêpan.” Nine reaches the floor and towers over me. I forgot how tall he is. Intimidating. He shoves a handful of what he’s been eating in my face. “You want some of this or not? Because I’m about to finish it off.”

The sight of it makes my stomach churn. “What is it?”

“Barbecued rabbit. Nature’s finest.”

I don't dare open my mouth to respond, afraid that I might get sick. Instead, I stumble back toward the bedroom, ignoring the laughter that follows me. The bedroom door is so warped it's nearly impossible to close, but I wedge it into the door frame as tightly as I can. I lie down, using my sweatshirt as a pillow, and think about how I ended up here, ended up like this. Without Henri. Without Sam. Sam is my best friend, who I had been traveling and fighting alongside for the last several months. I miss him. I can't believe we left him behind. As thoughtful and loyal and supportive as Sam is, Nine is so very not. He's reckless, arrogant, selfish and just flat-out rude. I picture Sam, back in the Mog cave, a gun rocking against his shoulder as a dozen Mogadorian soldiers swarm him. I couldn't get to him. I couldn't save him. I should have fought harder, run faster. I should have ignored Nine and gone back to Sam. He would have done that for me. The immense amount of guilt I feel paralyzes me, until I finally fall asleep.

It's dark. I'm no longer in a house in the mountains with Nine. I no longer feel the painful effects of the blue force field. My head is finally clear, although I don't know where I am, or how I got here. When I shout for help, I can't hear my voice even though I feel my lips moving. I shuffle ahead, hands out in front of me. My palms suddenly start to glow with my Lumen. The light is dim at first, but quickly grows into two powerful beams.

"John." A hoarse whisper says my name.

I whip my hands around to see where I am, but the light reveals only empty darkness. I'm entering a vision. I angle my palms at the ground so my Lumen will light my way and start toward the voice. The hoarse whisper keeps repeating my name over and over. It sounds young and full of fear. Then comes another voice, gruff and staccato, barking orders.

The voices become clearer. It's Sam, my lost friend, and Setrákus Ra, my worst enemy. I can tell I'm nearing the Mogadorian base. I can see the blue force field, the source of so much pain. For some reason, I know it won't hurt me now, and I don't hesitate to pass through it. When I do, it's not my screams I hear, but Sam's. His tortured voice fills my head as I enter the mountain and move through its mazelike tunnels. I see the charred remains of our recent battle, from when I tossed a ball of green lava at the gas tanks

at the mountain's bottom, sending a sea of fire raging upward. I move through the main cavernous hall and its spiraling ledges. I step onto the arched stone bridge Sam and I so recently crossed under the cloak of invisibility. I keep going, passing through tributaries and corridors, all while being forced to listen to my best friend's crippling howls.

I know where I'm going before I get there. The steady incline of the floor lands me in the wide room lined with prison cells.

There they are. Setrákus Ra is standing in the middle of the room. He is *huge* and truly revolting looking. And there's Sam. He's suspended inside a small spherical cage next to him. His own private torture bubble.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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PITTACUS LORE is Lorien's ruling Elder. He has been on Earth preparing for the war that will decide Earth's fate. His whereabouts are unknown.

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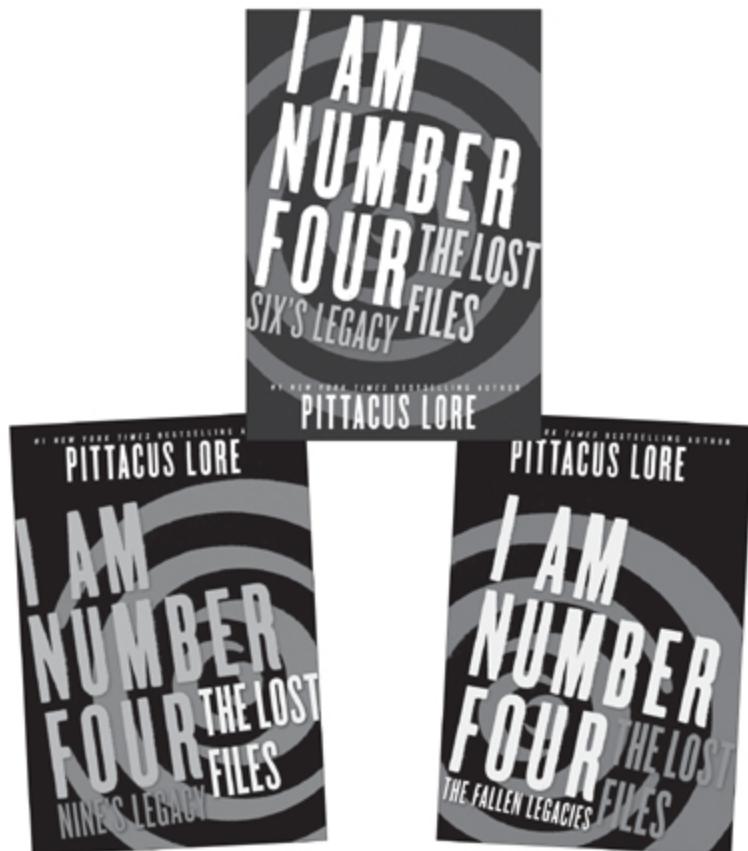
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